

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Fourth Sunday of Advent  
Sunday, December 21, 2025**

**“God Is with Us”  
Matthew 1:18-25**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

We are in the midst of a season that, for many Canadians, may not feel like “the most wonderful time of the year” but rather like “the most [stressful] time of the year.” At this time of year, feelings of grief or loss can be amplified; tensions within families can be magnified; financial worries can be intensified; indeed, so many stresses can pile up that, according to one poll, 63% of adults find this season more stressful than tax season!

Now, if any of that resonates with you—if perhaps you’re experiencing this season as stressful rather than joyful—then please allow me to introduce you to someone who, much like you, experienced Christmas as stressful. I’d like you to meet someone who was so stressed out by Christmas, he could barely even get any sleep. May I present to you...Joseph—poor, tired, stressed-out Joseph.

Now, when I say that Joseph had a stressful Christmas, wow did he ever have a stressful Christmas! In our Gospel Lesson, we hear all about it: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way,” Matthew writes. “When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (vv. 18-19).

Joseph finds himself in a rather difficult situation—made all the more complicated by the fact that “Joseph bec[ame] aware of the pregnancy before he learn[ed of] the cause” (Hare). Not yet knowing what’s really going on, Joseph is left to contend with learning that his fiancée is pregnant and he isn’t the father.

Erin Martin, a Methodist pastor, reflects on Joseph’s experience of all this. She writes: “Joseph is a bit bewildered by the news of Mary’s pregnancy. He should not have been the last [...] to know.” And so “Joseph finds himself in a precarious position: he’s involved in Mary’s pregnancy, but not ‘involved’ in the [usual] way. Legally, the baby is his, but he is not the father. He is betrothed to Mary, but she is not his wife.”

Martin writes, “It’s situations like these that can keep a man awake at night. I imagine Joseph lying in his bed wondering where things went wrong,” she adds. “Life wasn’t supposed to happen this way. He was a good man. He thought he had chosen a capable woman for a wife. Now, everything’s a disaster.” We can only imagine what Joseph went through in the midst of all this: feelings of betrayal, heartbreak, confusion. And of course, the stressful decision: what should he do?

In the end, Joseph decided that he would break things off with Mary; he’d call off the wedding, he figured, but he’ll try keep everything as quiet as he can. It’s an imperfect solution for an unhappy situation. Sometimes a difficult decision can keep us awake well into the night—tossing and turning as

we weigh pros and cons. For Joseph, after he finally comes to a decision now, he can finally drift off to sleep—though he won't be asleep for long!

“But,” Matthew writes, “just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,’  
which means, ‘God is with us’ (v. 20-23)

Wow. I mean, that's a lot to process! Poor, stressed-out Joseph finally gets to sleep—then an angel intrudes on his dreams to deliver a shocking message. Just imagine what Joseph experienced! “Joseph, I'm an angel of the Lord—oh no, you're still sleeping, but this is real. Now, Joseph, listen: God is fulfilling an ancient prophecy in a way no one expected—and Mary's baby is God's Son, who will redeem the world. So your fiancée is the Mother of God. Okay? Also, do us a favour: name the baby, ‘Jesus.’ It will all make sense later. Bye, Joseph. Sleep well!”

As if Joseph hadn't already been through an emotional roller coaster! Can you imagine the weight of responsibility that this angelic message laid upon him? I mean, most dads-to-be are, at the best of times, already pretty nervous, unsure how they'll manage with parenting and all that. But to be told that you will parent the Son of God? Really, how could that not be overwhelming? And poor Joseph just wanted a good night's sleep... Considering the nights he's been having, nativity scenes should depict Joseph with dark circles under his eyes and an extra-large coffee in his hand!

So what does Joseph do next? He could try to resist this calling; he could protest that he's not up to the task. I mean, even great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, initially resisted God's calling (Isaiah 6:5; Jeremiah 1:6). Yet not so with Joseph; I just love his simple, faithful response. Matthew writes: “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus” (vv. 24-25). That's it! No hesitation, no period of doubt, no effort to evade the calling that God had laid upon him.

Now did Joseph fully understand what was happening? No, of course not! How could he? Yet in his remarkable simplicity and faithfulness, Joseph wakes up—figures, “Alright, well, this is happening!”—then says yes to God coming close. And in this way, Joseph places his life in the service of God coming near in Christ.

Now here's the thing about Joseph: amid all these dramatic events, we find him, well, surprisingly relatable; even as he contends with these uncertainties and surprises, he comes across as remarkably unremarkable. See, before these events—before he was suddenly drawn into the drama of God coming near in Christ—before all this, Joseph was the sort of person history forgets. He was an ordinary guy with an ordinary job in an ordinary town. He wasn't famous or powerful; he wasn't a compelling speaker or a brilliant teacher; there's nothing in the Bible to suggest that he was ‘destined for greatness’ or anything like that. He was, in the very best sense of the word, ordinary; he was, quite literally, an “ordinary Joe.”

And this matters—that Joseph was ordinary matters—because in his ordinariness, we recognize that the grace of Christmas is *for us*. One theologian explains it like this: As “[i]mportant as he became in some ways, even [...] having churches and hospitals named for him, Joseph appears as a humane but otherwise ordinary, forgettable fellow with conventional hopes for himself and his family. That is, he’s one of us” (Niedner). If Joseph were some extraordinary hero, larger-than-life—then we could be left wondering whether any of this was really meant for us.

Yet at Christmas, when God entered the world as Emmanuel—which means, “God with us”—this really was “God with us”! At Christmas, it was ordinary people going about their ordinary lives who were visited by God in an extraordinary act of grace. At Christmas, *this* world was changed by God’s nearness. At Christmas, the ancient promise of Emmanuel sprang to life *here*. At Christmas, the living Lord became a baby in *this* world. And at Christmas, it’s *this* world that has been touched, *this* world that has been visited, *this* world where God has made his home as one of us. By the grace of God, what seemed impossible became possible—in an ordinary village with ordinary people. The Good News of Christmas, the Good News of Emmanuel, is not God alone—but God *with us*, God *with you*.

I began this sermon acknowledging that this can be a stressful season. But as I said, if you’re feeling that stress today—then look to Joseph, because he knows a little something about a stressful Christmas; yet Joseph also teaches us the Good News that Christmas is for stressed-out people, because—at Christmas—when God comes close in Christ—it’s for us, with us, right here, in the real world. Thank God! Amen.