

---

## *Christmas is Trusting the Holiness in Another Person*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Advent 4 – Year A**

*“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.” – Matthew 1:20*

It was a few days before Christmas. A woman woke up one morning and told her husband, “I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?” “Oh,” he replied, “you’ll know the day after tomorrow.”

The next morning, she turned to her husband and said the same thing, “I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?” “You’ll know tomorrow,” he said.

On the third morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband, “I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?” He smiled back, “Oh, you’ll know tonight.”

That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted. She opened it gently. But when she did, she found — a book! It was titled *The Meaning of Dreams*.

Dreams. Visions. Hopes. Fears. This is the season for them. But how do we know what’s going on with them? And how do we know what is going on inside all the other people in our lives? The Christmas story of Joseph and Mary might remind us how hard this is. It’s hard for a man to know what goes on inside a woman. Some men realize this early on in their lives, and they resign themselves to jokes and laughter about the inability. Sometimes, men even carry on as if women didn’t exist. Others of us give it a good shot; but, as sensitive we may try to be, there are times when we never really understand.

It might be that the gospel-writer Matthew understood full well his inability to know what goes on inside women. And so, he doesn’t even try to tell us! Get this: Of all the stories we have about the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary, all our Christmas Pageant stories, the stories we have about Mary’s fear and trust and faith, stories which are quite beautiful — none of those stories comes from the Gospel of Matthew! All the stories about Mary’s role in the nativity of Jesus come only from the Gospel of Luke. Matthew never even supposes how Mary felt.

Instead, Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus centers around the man, centers around Joseph. Today’s gospel passage is the story of the angel’s appearance not to Mary, but to Joseph! It gives the details not of how Mary felt, but of how Joseph felt.

In the Israel of that era, marriage was a two-part process. The first stage was betrothal, wherein a young girl was promised to a man, and the man had legal rights over her. But she often remained living with her parents until the second part, wherein the actual marriage occurred. It was during this interim time that Mary was found to be pregnant, a shameful predicament.

Joseph, Matthew says, was both a just and merciful man. He knew he could not proceed with the full marriage, but he also resolved not to shame her. It was as he was considering this predicament that an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.

Thus, the message of the angel, according to Matthew, was directed not to Mary, but to Joseph. The comforting words, “do not fear,” were directed to Joseph. The command to call his name Jesus, the promise that he would save the people from their sins, came to Joseph.

We associate many miracles with the Christmas story: conception by the Holy Spirit, angels appearing to people, a wondrous star in the East, Mary’s belief and willingness to conceive, and, of course, the deep miracle of God becoming human at all.

But another sort of miracle happened two thousand years ago, one that we often miss. Matthew did not miss it. It is this: In a society that fully expected a wife to be always obedient to her husband, a husband instead was obedient to his wife.

A man had compassion on a woman. A man did not know what was going on inside a woman, and yet he trusted her. A man endured shame and societal ridicule because of what was going on in a woman. In fact, we might say that a man *had faith* in what was going on in a woman.

The story cannot be simplified to mean only that “Joseph was obeying an angel.” For the angel came only for a few fleeting moments. Mary was pregnant and present and very real for nine long months! It was for those nine months that Joseph was obedient to his wife. He was waiting and watching what went on with Mary. It was that mysterious process of growth inside a woman that he was obedient to.

In fact, just like Mary, Joseph was actually preparing for the Holy One to enter his own life. But unlike Mary, Joseph had to prepare for the Holy One to pass through the body of someone else. Joseph had to accept the Holy from someone else. Joseph had to accept the Holy from a woman.

Yes, it is hard for men to know what goes on inside women. It’s hard for women to know what goes on inside men, too! Our human reality is that it’s hard to know what is going on inside anybody other than ourselves, male or female. But to *trust* whatever is going on is even harder. And to be *obedient* to what goes on inside another person is a miracle!

Yet, that is exactly what true love is, Christmas love! True love is trusting what is going on inside another person. Relationships which endure in life are not those based on fleeting moments or misdirected dreams, as if a mere dream could make you love someone. Dreams don’t make you love someone, because dreams don’t teach you to trust. True lovers know that their love is not a dream; their love is a mutual trust in the holiness of the other person.

Yes, deep love is a trust in the holiness of the other person. The Christmas scenario as Matthew presents it is that a man, Joseph, learned to trust the holiness of another person: the woman, Mary.

That is the lesson that good old, forgotten, Joseph gives to us today. He gives the lesson to men, for sure – especially, for instance, men who might raise children in blended families. But the lesson of Joseph is given to all of us, not just to men. How do you care for a woman when you have no idea what is going on in her? How do you care for a child who was not really born to you, but for whom you have responsibility?

Our role is to emulate Joseph’s trust. We, too, can be obedient to a mystery. We, too, can follow something that we do not understand. We, too, can trust the presence and growth of God in someone else. It may be our wife; it may be our husband. It may be our children. What fear! What awe! That growth inside the other person is of God! In fact, that growth and development is God, the Holy.

Today, whether we are men or women, most of us can experience the Holy only through someone else. We will have to go through what Joseph went through. To wait for the incarnation of Jesus Christ usually means that we must wait for that incarnation to be born in someone else. It may take nine long months to see it come to pass. It may take nine long years. But truly, if God chose to be incarnate through a poor unmarried Hebrew girl centuries ago, God can be incarnate through anyone today.

So it is, today, that I offer this definition of enduring love: to trust in the holiness of the other person. When that other person is pregnant without you knowing how. That person is your daughter! When that other person gives only silence in response to your constant questions. That person is your wife! When that other person cannot even give you a reasonable answer for his behavior. That person is your son! When that other person cannot show you how he feels. That person is

your husband! That other person in your life is your companion, your friend, your community! That person—whoever it is—is holy, because God is becoming incarnate in them. Christmas is trusting the holiness in another person.

Do not fear, said the angel, to take Mary as your wife. Do not fear, says the angel, to trust and be obedient to the other person; for that which is conceived in them is of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

---

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*