



ABOUT THE THEME

Advent is a season of waiting, but is idle waiting what God wants of us? In preparation for the coming Messiah, we wonder together—what things can't wait? What demands our immediate attention? What requires our work and preparation? What is it that God can't wait for? Is it our praise, reconciliation, and proclamation? Is it the end of suffering, isolation, and fear? This Advent, we are invited to join in imagining, prioritizing, and preparing. As we wait, what can't?

DECEMBER 22nd | 4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT | COURAGE (LOVE) CAN'T WAIT | MATTHEW 1:18-25

As Christmas draws near, we meditate on the courage required of both Joseph and Mary. When Joseph learns of Mary's pregnancy, he decides to avert scandal and dismiss her quietly. But when an angel comes to him in a dream, he chooses to trust the angel and act counter to social and gender norms—all so that the world might know love. How might we practice courageous, counter-cultural love? How can we be brave enough to love one another and respond to God's call in our lives?

MATTHEW 1:18-25 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^[a] took place in this way. 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. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;^[b] and he named him Jesus.

Footnotes:

- a. [Matthew 1:18](#) Or *Jesus Christ*
- b. [Matthew 1:25](#) Other ancient authorities read *her firstborn son*

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Read Deuteronomy 22:13-21 (below) for the full context of Deuteronomic law concerning a woman's virginity before marriage. How is Mary's safety at risk in delivering the Christ child? What does Joseph risk or give up by marrying Mary and adopting Jesus as his own?

¹³ Suppose a man marries a woman, but after going in to her, he dislikes her ¹⁴ and makes up charges against her, slandering her by saying, "I married this woman; but when I lay with her, I did not find evidence of her virginity." ¹⁵ The father of the young woman and her mother shall then submit the evidence of the young woman's virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. ¹⁶ The father of the young woman shall say to the elders: "I gave my daughter in marriage to this man but he dislikes her; ¹⁷ now he has made up charges against her, saying, 'I did not find evidence of your daughter's virginity.' But here is the evidence of my daughter's virginity." Then they shall spread out the cloth before the elders of the town. ¹⁸ The elders of that town shall take the man and punish him; ¹⁹ they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver (which they shall give to the young woman's father) because he has slandered a virgin of Israel. She shall remain his wife; he shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.

²⁰ If, however, this charge is true, that evidence of the young woman's virginity was not found, ²¹ then they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

- Despite veering from Deuteronomic law, Joseph is described as "righteous" (Matt.1:19). He chooses to follow the way of justice and love instead of the law of the land. What does it look like for us to follow the law of love? How do we discern when to disobey unjust laws in order to obey God?
- The angel gives Joseph the task of naming Jesus (meaning, "he saves"). In this act, Joseph claims Jesus as his firstborn son. What challenges do you imagine Joseph faced as Jesus' adopted father? Why is it significant that Jesus be fully claimed as Joseph's son?



ARTIST'S STATEMENT | "TRUST"

by Hannah Garrity | inspired by Matthew 1:18-25 | acrylic on canvas

I imagine Joseph scoffing at Mary's explanation. "Trust me." "How can I?" I hear a tense conversation filled with tears and devastation. I sense fear of societal judgement. What will people say?

Joseph is skeptical. He knows he cannot be the father of the baby. He decides to break his engagement with Mary. He must feel so betrayed by her. So, how is it that he can believe the angel in the dream? Suddenly, he welcomes the opportunity to parent Jesus anyway. He follows through on his commitment to Mary anyway.

Trust in Mary, trust in God; Joseph could only have managed his role in this story with trust. His faith relies heavily on trust. Deep down, we know who we can trust. Subconsciously, we all know right from wrong.

In this image, Joseph has just placed the wedding ring on Mary's hand. They have just said their vows, committing their lives to each other. Here, Joseph seals his trust in Mary's word, his trust in the word of God, with action.

Whom do I need to let God lead me to trust? Where in my life is my justified skepticism keeping me from God's call? How am I letting my concern for the opinions of society impede my willingness to act on God's word?

SOMETHING MORE TO CONSIDER

"The root of the word *courage* is *cor*—the Latin word for *heart*. In one of its earliest forms, the word *courage* had a very different definition than it does today. Courage originally meant 'To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart.' Over time, this definition has changed, and today, courage is more synonymous with being heroic. Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we've lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we're feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our *vulnerability* on the line. In today's world, that's pretty extraordinary."

—Brené Brown. "Ordinary Courage." Published on *Behavioral Health Evolution* online. http://www.bhevolution.org/public/gifts_of_imperfection.page.

"There are messengers of love all around. And again, and forever, they say: *do not be afraid*. Do not be afraid. For in the heart of God there is enough love to cast out fear. It is from this heart we come and to this heart we return and it beats around us and is shown in the shimmering love that absolutely covers this world. There is enough love to cast out our fear. And it's everywhere."

—Nadia Bolz-Weber. "Fear vs Love: a Sermon about 2 Different Kinds of Men." Published on *Patheos*. January 2, 2017.

COURAGE CAN'T WAIT | Poetry Prayer by Sarah Are

When people talk about love
They talk about heartbreak.
They talk about the love that got away,
And the love that left them longing.

When people talk about love
Rarely do they say, "be brave."
I wish they would.

To love is to pull the oxygen from your lungs
and to say,
"Here, take a breath."
To love is to come out from hiding,
To allow the light to shine on you.
To love is to wear your heart outside of
your body—
Fingers crossed that the holder handles it with care.
To love is to trust that sometimes hurt and pain
come with the territory,
But you're going to love anyway.
So love anyway.

Love like there's no tomorrow.
Love as if love is not a scarcity.

Love like Mary, who cradled a baby amidst the
threat of being stoned.
And love like Joseph, who took a child in that he knew
was not his own.

Of course I say all of this because I need to hear it too.
There are dusty corners of my heart that I still protect—
Love stored up like grain
While the world is in famine.

So the next time you see me,
Remind me to be brave.
The next time you see me,
Invite me to stand in the light with you.
The next time you see me,
Handle with care and maybe,
Just maybe,
We'll find a holy and wild
Love that won't wait.

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They talk about heartbreak.
Rarely do they say, "be brave."
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