

**What a Man!**  
**December 18, 2022**  
**Pastor John Mars**

Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture today that comes from the first chapter of the book of Matthew, beginning with verse 18.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us."

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and he took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent; next Sunday is Christmas. I'm still wondering what happened to August and September! This is the fourth Sunday of Advent, and traditionally we talk about Mary on the fourth Sunday of Advent. We're going to break with tradition this week; we're going to talk about Joseph. Whoever you think Joseph was, and we'll get to that in a moment, he must have been an extraordinary man. Of all the men on earth, God picked Joseph to be the earthly father of His Son, who would grow to be the Savior of the world. Let the magnitude of that statement sink in for a moment. Of all the men on earth, God picked Joseph to be the earthly father of His Son, who would be the Savior of the world. God picked him to raise His son, to love him, to teach him, and to protect him. But who was Joseph? From the story we just read a moment ago, it seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? But not so fast! It depends on your perspective, and it depends on what tradition you grew up in. If you grew up in the Catholic Church, you think one thing. If you grew up in a Protestant church, you think something quite different. Our Catholic brothers and sisters believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary, that she conceived as a virgin, and she died as a virgin. They believe that, when it was discovered that Mary was with child, that God revealed to a small group of elderly priests that what was conceived in her was indeed of the Holy Spirit, and that somebody must marry her, and take care of Mary and the child. And so they cast lots, and the lot fell to Joseph, who was very elderly at the time. But because he was in the presence of Mary and the presence of Jesus Christ, he was granted extraordinary health, and lived to be very old. As the story goes, as tradition has it, when Jesus was 18 or 19 years old, Joseph died at the ripe old age of 111 to 118. Now, if you're Protestant, which we are, we take this story at face value. We interpret it in light of traditional Jewish marriage practices of the time. In that era, marriages were

arranged. Marriage was much too important to be trusted to the fickleness of the human heart. So parents, sometimes with help, picked out their children's mates. I'm so glad that practice has died! Sometimes kids grew up as children knowing who they would marry when the time came. And then when the parents decided that their children were old enough to get married, they began a year-long formal engagement. During that period of time, the children, these kids, these teenagers, had no relations, but they were considered to be husband and wife. And the only way to dissolve this intense engagement was through divorce. And we believe that that is the stage at which Mary and Joseph were, at that point. And if tradition holds, these two teenagers would have been 15 to 18 years of age.

Whether you believe that Joseph was an old man or a young man, he must have an extraordinary man. (An interesting factoid for you: How many of you have a nativity set? Almost all of you have a nativity set. You can tell whether a Catholic person or a Protestant person made your nativity set, based on the age of Joseph. Go take a look.) Joseph, no matter who you think he was, was an extraordinary man. He was the right man, at the right time, to do the right thing. God raised him up. He was a man of love, to love Mary and to love Jesus, and to teach Jesus about love. You see, the Scriptures tell us that Jesus Christ emptied himself of his divinity, and grew in wisdom and in stature, and also in favor with God and with man. He grew like children grow today. Joseph was a man of love. He was a man of faith. Jesus got his foundation in faith from Joseph and from Mary. Joseph was a man of courage, because there were people who wanted to take Jesus' life. As important as those facts are, Joseph was a man who listened to God. And when God spoke, he responded. He didn't **try** to hear God, he **trained** himself to hear God. And he knew that God spoke to him in dreams. And when God spoke to him in a dream, as occurs in this story, and again and again and again in the story of Jesus, he acted. He responded immediately.

God is still raising up people to meet the challenges that we face in our church today. God is still in the business of raising up the right people, at the right time, to do the right thing. For instance, how many of you can still remember when we began talking about COVID? I was not paying any attention to COVID, and I was one of the clergy on a Women's Walk to Emmaus when the decree came down on Saturday that we had to shut down. (We didn't, but they asked us to! We gave everybody the opportunity to leave if they wanted to, but nobody left. And we stayed there until the next day.) When that happened, all of us thought, "Okay, okay, maybe a couple of Sundays." You remember that? And then, "Well, maybe a month." And then it was, "Oh my gosh, we might miss Easter!" And then we missed two Easters. Those were hard times. Those were tough times. And, in this church, God raised up Pastor Kim Fields and Pastor Sharyn Withers to meet the challenges that you were facing. And they had to adapt, and they had to change. Every week it was something different. I know because we went through it, too. And you evolved. And when it became clear that this wasn't going to be just a drop in the bucket, but it was going to last, God raised up the media team of this church. And you began to broadcast, and you began to evolve, and you did whatever it took to keep this congregation safe, and to try to meet the spiritual needs of this congregation. Amen?

I think about this Executive Council and the trials that they have been through. And I have only been here for 18 months, but I want to tell you, they've been through the wringer. There are many challenges and disagreements related to COVID. A friend of a friend of mine is a pastor of a church in the Midwest, with about 400 in his congregation. Their bishop said, "Y'all make the best decisions you can," and he put it on all the individual churches to try to decide what was best for their congregation. And the pastor said, "You know, I have 200 in my congregation that say, if we open up, they're going to leave. The other 200 say, if we don't open up, they're going to leave." Those were the challenges that we faced during this time. This executive council had to decide: "How do we keep our congregation safe? And how do we meet their needs? And what do we need to do?" And they worked diligently.

Ongoing at that same time, while we were dealing with COVID, there was denominational strife, denominational talks of disaffiliation, and decisions to be made whether or not to leave the United Methodist Church. Now, this is not a United Methodist Church, and not likely to become a United Methodist Church. We are administered by the United Methodist Church. And so, this Executive Council had to rattle with the decision about disaffiliation. What must we do? What should we do? And like the Executive Council of 2018 and the Executive Council of 2019, they decided to table any discussion about disaffiliation after the 2024 Conference. Why? Number one, the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church hasn't changed any in 40 years. It still says the same thing. Number two, we don't have enough information to make an intelligent decision until after the Conference. And number three, there's a little thing that it would cost us north of \$2,700,000. And so, we talked about it. We debated it. And I am so proud of this group! This is a very emotional topic. They never raised their voices. They never had a cross word. We talked about it. We prayed about it. And then we voted in secret ballot, so that everybody could vote their conscience. And we voted thirteen to one, to table it until 2024.

And oh, by the way, if that isn't enough, we had to talk about how do we do a reopening. Do you remember reopening after COVID? Do you remember not being able to touch each other? Do you know how hard it is for us not to touch each other? We couldn't shake hands. We couldn't hug. We couldn't even sing. We had to stay six feet apart. Back in those days we were wiping down all the surfaces, scared to death. We didn't know what to do. We faced all kinds of fears and all kinds of fighting. And still, are we yet alive. And we are still here.

And y'all thought I was done. This same group had to face massive changes during the middle of COVID. You lost your beloved pastor, and you got this guy from the wilds of Idaho, by way of Mississippi, right during the middle of a pandemic. And then Pastor Sharyn retired, and we decided to go a different direction. And we hired Pastor Aaron Johnson. And the fact of the matter is, you could say we hired Aaron three times. And I'll get to that in a minute, but we hired Aaron three times. When we hired Aaron, we hired him to be the Associate Pastor of Discipleship. And we thought we had somebody to do Congregational Care. That fell through, and so we came back to Aaron and asked him, "Oh, how about doing Congregational Care, too?" And he said, "I'll do it," and he began to train himself to do that. At the same time, we were looking for somebody to lead our

choir, even though the choir was not even meeting yet. We were still looking for somebody to lead the choir. And I was talking to a couple who were interested in membership. Their names were Pat and Doug Dunn. And I just happened to find out that Pastor Pat indeed is a retired Pastor of Music, but also, she was ordained as a pastor. And when I mentioned, "Have I got a deal for you," I remember, Pat, you were sitting there in my office and you just began to bawl, to cry. You said, "That's my heart!" And we hired her to lead our choir, even though the choir wasn't yet meeting together again. When she started meeting with the Pastoral Leadership Team, we were talking about what we had done with Aaron. And, after one of our meetings, she said, "You know, my first love is music. My second is Pastoral Care." So I talked to Aaron and I said, "Aaron, we have somebody who can do the Pastoral Care. Would you mind giving it up?" He said, "Yes!" And so, he got another new job and Pat got another new job. And that is half of what this Executive Council has been through. God has raised up the right people, at the right time, to do the right job for this congregation. Now, in January we're going to celebrate those that are going off the Executive Council, and we're going to celebrate the new group that is coming in. And I have absolute peace in my heart, in my mind, that God has raised up the right people, at the right time, in the right place, to do the right thing for this church with the new Council. We are going to face challenges, but God has brought the right people to do what needs to be done. That is how God works.

So, what do you need to do? Be ready. Be ready. You never know when God's gonna call your number, when you are the right person, at the right place, at the right time, to do the right thing. You've got to listen. You've got to watch. And you do not **try** to hear the voice of God, you **train** to hear the voice of God. Joseph heard God because he was listening. He had learned that when God wanted to get his attention, He spoke to him in a dream. And when God spoke to him in a dream, he responded immediately. Now, I want to speak to the guys here for just a moment. If you were engaged to a woman, and she came up pregnant, and you know that you know that you know you are not the daddy, and you have a dream that says, "Marry her anyway," what are you going to do? I'm gonna get up in the morning and go, "I must have had a bad taco. I had some weird dreams last night!" But you see, Joseph had trained himself to hear the voice of God, and that is how God spoke to him. And when God spoke to him in a dream and said, "Don't be afraid to take Mary home with you," he took her home and married her there. And it's a good thing that he did not hesitate, because later on God would appear to him again and say, "There are people trying to kill Jesus. Get up and leave." And he got up and he grabbed Mary and grabbed Jesus, and they took off immediately. And had he hesitated, Jesus could have been killed.

Train yourself to listen. Y'all hear me? The world doesn't know it, but the world needs us. The world has not figured it out, but the world needs us and the message that we bear. I don't know if you have been listening to the Advent presentations during the last four weeks, but here they are: hope, peace, love, and joy. And this Saturday night, we will light the Christ candle. Now what I'm about to ask you is not rhetorical. I repeat, it's not rhetorical. Does our world need hope? Does our world need peace? Does our world need love? Does our world need joy? Does our world need Jesus Christ? That is what we have and that is what we offer. God has raised us up at the right time, in the right place, to do the right thing, and we are ministering to this community. I wish all of you

could have been here this past Thursday. There were three small buses that came and picked up the presents and gifts from the Giving Tree. Three busloads! You did it. Your generosity did that. We are meeting the needs of this community, and God has raised us up for this moment, as individuals, and us as a congregation. Joseph was the right person, at the right time, to do the right thing, and through him and Mary, God blessed the world. And guess what? You're the right person, too, and so am I, and so are we together. God has raised us up for this moment, in this community, for the task we are facing. Let's be a blessing. Let's be a blessing. Whatever we face, God will raise up the people needed to meet the challenge, to be a blessing. We offer our world hope and peace and love and joy, but most importantly, we offer our world Christ. The world doesn't know they need us, but they do. Let's be a blessing.

Let's pray. God has raised you up for this moment and this time. Be ready. You never know when that moment might arise where you have the opportunity to be a blessing. Let us pray.

Gracious God, thank You for raising up men and women through the centuries to bless us. We're thankful for the example of Joseph, who listened and acted immediately when it was required. Lord, help us to follow that example. Help us to be that pattern. And help us to bless our world. In Jesus' name, amen.