

Prepare Him Room When Plans Change

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Matthew 1:18-25
on December 7, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

It was a few days before Christmas on a day like today, days that parents start running through all their tricks to keep young children occupied, when young Megan, age four, was drawing a picture of the nativity. Megan's mother was a pastor, which made this activity very on-brand. Megan worked steadily, focused and clear, when with a flourish, she declared the drawing done. She took it to her mother, Laura, explaining each character in the scene: shepherds and sheep, three wise men with their camels, the stable with cows and cats and dogs, and right in the center, Mary and baby Jesus.

Laura noticed something was missing – someone was missing – and asked, “Megan, where’s Joseph?” She assumed Megan would remember and add him in. Instead, Megan practically rolled her eyes and asked defiantly, “who needs Joseph anyway?”¹

That seemed to be the case for us, when as new parents, Josh and I bought our first children’s nativity set, only to open it all up and see that among animals and angels, mother and baby, stable and star, Joseph was nowhere to be found. We decided that a Little People figurine of a mustached firefighter in a bright yellow coat would be a good stand in for Joseph, and he still stands in today.

II.

Ah Joseph. The strong, silent type. Overlooked in artwork and nativity sets for generations. Quiet and curious. A role less defined and

¹ Story as told by Rev. Dr. John Buchanan in his sermon, “Joseph,” at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, on December 12, 2004: <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2004/121204.html>

misunderstood. Our friend Richard Groves preached about Joseph once, and did some research to find out just how many mentions Joseph had in our Christmas hymnody. The baby is referenced in most, of course, and Mary, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men, the cattle and the sheep, even the drummer boy, Jeannette and Isabella (whoever they were!), and Bethlehem! But Joseph? In the 80 carols Richard surveyed, only one reference to him – perhaps before the beautiful hymn we’ll sing in a few minutes was written! “Poor Joseph,” Richard concluded, “the forgotten man in the Christmas story.”²

What little we know about Joseph comes mostly from the two birth and infancy stories when he’s mentioned – here in Matthew, and one in Luke. He’ll come up once more when young Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem at the Temple as a teenager, but otherwise it is a limited written account of Joseph’s life. He’s a carpenter from Bethlehem, the little town just outside Jerusalem, but moved to Nazareth later in life, some 90 miles away, perhaps for work.

But to Matthew, the most important part of Joseph’s story is his family. To Matthew, that Joseph was of the house and lineage of David mattered most. It was a distinguished family line: of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph; of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba; of Solomon and Amos and Jacob, and generations more. Observant Jews like Joseph would have known these ancestors and their stories, would have told and retold them, passing them down from generation to generation, hoping for the coming messiah.

Joseph’s lineage mattered for *Jesus*, you see. It’s not an accident that Joseph’s part of the Christmas story follows a telling of that lineage. When we meet him in the Gospel of Matthew, we hear quickly the familiar story:

² Richard Groves, “The Forgotten Man in the Christmas Story,” *Living in the Mystery*, p119.

Joseph's fiancée, Mary, was pregnant. A child from the Holy Spirit, the text says. And for a faithful Jew who abided by the laws governing their faith, Joseph had every reason to have Mary cast out or stoned.

Culture would've told Joseph to "man up" and disavow her. It was expected of him, commanded of any Jewish man for that matter whose betrothed got pregnant. *What would people think of him?* Perhaps nursing a wounded pride, Joseph decides to do what was faithful and compassionate. Nazareth was one of those small towns, you know, a "everyone knows everyone... and thus, everyone knows everyone's business" kind of place. We know those places. Joseph knew what would come: the whispers behind hands, the furtive looks, the toxicity that would surround the woman of his heart. With grace and care for Mary's dignity, Joseph decides to divorce her quietly, ending the relationship in such a way that won't add to her misery.

But then, as God so often does, the story takes a turn. Plans change once again. In a dream, Joseph is visited by an angel of the Lord, assuring him that Mary has not been unfaithful, rather that the son of God is growing in her womb, a son that Joseph will name and raise as his own. By naming the baby, Joseph completes his role in bringing Jesus to life. That role that mattered deeply in the legitimacy and identity of Jesus. Remember: faithful Jews knew their Messiah, the anointed one, the one for whom they had waited, must come through the house and lineage of David. So when the angel says to Joseph, "you shall name him Jesus," this was a moment for Joseph to claim, to adopt, to take in Jesus as his own son. "Jesus," the hearers would know, derives from the name "Joshua," which means "the Lord saves."³

³ Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p25.

Even in this turn of events, even in all he does not or will not ever know, even as he took a risk, Joseph received reassurance: “Do not be afraid,” the angel says. “Do not be afraid to marry. To give your whole heart to this child. To believe me, even if others don’t understand. Do not be afraid, Joseph, for in your moral courage, you will inspire generations. Do not be afraid, for by living bravely, you’ll encourage Jesus to do the same – and then to share that message with a fearful world. Do not be afraid, Joseph, for your son will be Emmanuel. God with us. God with *you*.”

III.

It’s a story that you don’t have to be the father of Jesus to understand. Among parents, how many parents parent a child who’s different from them, a child who defies expectations, a child who throws everything they think they know about the world into question, a child that became their own, not through blood but through love?

Beyond the experience of being a parent, I bet each of us has had situations in our lives that don’t go according to plan. That are disrupted with scandal, or grief, or loss, or endings. That seethe with disappointment when expectations aren’t met or when arrangements go awry. That grip us with longing for the way things were and a resentment toward the way things are. What of our well-ordered lives when we lose a job, or receive a diagnosis, or end a relationship, or take on an unwanted responsibility? What of our best-laid plans when we struggle and suffer, when imperfection becomes the norm and all of it feels like a mess? What of our deeply-held dreams when they’re interrupted with a new call we’re not even sure is ours to answer? What, then, when it all falls apart?

IV.

One of our church's beloved saints was a woman named Deb Watkins who died last year. Many of you remember Deb, I'm sure – the small and mighty force who rarely missed a Sunday in her spot right over here, and could be found daily wheeling around downtown in her electric wheelchair, finding scrappy ways to move throughout the world without arms and legs as a Black woman in a world too quickly overlooking and dismissing every bit of who she was.

For when the bus accident changed her adult life as she knew it, Deb faced a daily choice of how to respond. Let me not romanticize her life – she had her quirks and angry days, as we all do. But I don't think I've ever known someone who has risen to the call of love when feeling forgotten or when plans changed more than Deb.

At church, we got to see that spirit up close. And I had a particular experience with Deb that captured it best. A half dozen years ago, I spent the morning with Deb and frankly felt popular just being with her, given the number of people stopping us for hellos and updates on their life. At the end of our errands, she needed me to take her to a place called Bio-Tech – not the gleaming Biotech Place in the Innovation Quarter, but BioTech Prosthetics and Orthotics, a medical center for amputees housed in a nondescript building over amidst the row of medical centers on Hawthorne Road.

I confess, I'd never even noticed the place before, although I drive over that way often. In we went, Deb teaching me about their mission along the way. The first thing I saw as we entered was the cheeky Christmas tree, twinkling with light and humor decorated in dozens of ornaments looking like the infamous “one-leg lamp” from the movie *A Christmas Story*. There were the doctors, nurses, and administrative assistants, all of whom got up from their

work and came to greet Deb with hugs and words of affection. There was the bulletin board bearing pictures of Deb and many other amputees in various stages of activity — some in physical therapy, others water-skiing or playing with their kids. One picture showed a large smiling group of folks — perhaps 30 or so — all who had experienced some sort of physical amputation.

“That’s my group!,” Deb tells me proudly.

“What group is that?,” I wonder aloud.

“My Thursday group! You know how the church is my family? Well that’s my family too, these folks right there,” Deb continued. The Thursday group, it seems, is a support group for amputees and caregivers that gathers at the Sticht Center for a fellowship meal and time of conversation. They’ve talked about everything from sharing tips on how to move through daily tasks like laundry or errands, to how to manage the depression and isolation that comes for so many after they experience amputation. “That group has saved me,” she said.

About that time, Deb greeted a man also in the waiting room and struck up a conversation. We learned that he was a new amputee, and was struggling emotionally — feeling stuck at home, confined to the relationships in his most immediate vicinity, unable in his grief and fear to imagine what new life could look like.

“Now you can’t do that!,” Deb said to him with a smile. “You got to get out, you got to keep going. Come to our Thursday group — you’ll see that you’re not alone, that we’re all here for each other.” Several others had overheard this conversation and began chiming in with their own witness about the importance of that Thursday group in their lives — what they’d learned from each other, how the group helped them find their way through

loss and anger and fear back to themselves, how over time a company of strangers became a family in which they are known and loved, how the group didn't promise a quick fix, but rather healed on a deeply restorative level.

In the twenty or so minutes I listened into this conversation, Deb must have told the guy a half a dozen times to come to the Thursday group – some times gentler than others. “Now listen,” she hollered back at the man as we were leaving the office, “I better see you at Thursday group!” The following Sunday just before worship began, I asked Deb if the guy from the waiting room showed up on Thursday night. And with a grin, she whooped and said, “I told him he better come, so of course he did! And he brought his mama! You know, we didn't even talk about our problems, we just shared love with each other.”

Then and now, I couldn't help but to hear the steady whisper of the Spirit, voicing what sounds to my ears like, “do not be afraid. God is with you.”

V.

Our life's circumstances are not the same as Joseph or Deb, but I imagine each of us struggle when our plans change, that we wish for some order in the thrumming noise of the world. Our dreams may not be the same, but I imagine each of us dreams of well-being – for ourselves, our family, our community, our world – dreams of love extended and shared, of belonging and purpose and dignity, of adventure and imagination. Our loves may not be the same, but I imagine each of us yearns to be human and wholehearted no matter what, seen and never forgotten.⁴

But despite our differences, our similarities to Joseph's are revealed in the reminder: “do not be afraid.” For it is precisely when plans change that

⁴ Ted Loder, “New Rules of Engagement,” *The Haunt of Grace*, p142.

fear rises. We start believing the lie that rules keep us controlled, that isolation keeps us unharmed, that safety keeps us sane. It's no accident that all throughout the Christmas stories, all throughout the gospels for that matter, we hear the invitation: *do not be afraid*. Plans will change, but do not be afraid. Disruptions will shake you, but do not be afraid. Things won't look like you thought they would, but do not be afraid. Love still takes the risk of birth, but do not be afraid.

So here's the invitation of this season, friends: when you don't know what tomorrow will bring, when you can't control the Christmas stress or the holiday visits, when you can't imagine how it all will look in the end, when fear becomes too constant a companion, may we all take our cue from Joseph and choose the way of love, one footstep at a time.

For if, like Joseph, when facing a choice, big or small, we can hear the promise of the angels, "do not fear, God is with you;" if, like Joseph, we're able to consider choosing a better way – not the epic way or the flashy way, but the daily way, the compassionate way, the humble way, the way that only leads to love – despite all we don't know or understand; then perhaps God might be born anew this year, right here in little old Winston-Salem, right here at First Baptist on Fifth, right here in you and me.⁵

Do not be afraid! God is with us. Amen!

⁵ With gratitude for Barbara Brown Taylor for this framing of this text in her sermon I quoted earlier, "Believing the Impossible," which has impacted my understanding of it in significant ways!