

What Do You Fear?

When You're Afraid, Give Me Your Hand

Fourth Sunday in Advent

*Matthew 1:18-25 Isaiah 42:5-10.
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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Fear flows quietly beneath Matthew's nativity story. It does not shout. It does not arrive with spectacle or drama. It moves more subtly than that—just under the surface, shaping decisions, narrowing possibilities, whispering warnings.

We hear it first in Joseph's impulse to "dismiss Mary quietly." We hear it again in the angel's opening words: "Do not be afraid." And we see it in the world into which Jesus is born—a precarious world of empire and control, of honor and shame, of surveillance and violence. An unwed mother. A fragile family. A child whose very existence will provoke fear in those who hold power.

Matthew's Gospel begins not with triumph, but with vulnerability. Not with certainty, but with risk. Not with fearlessness, but with fear held—carefully, faithfully—in trembling hands. And this matters, especially on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. By now, the waiting is almost over. The calendar is crowded. The sanctuary is dressed. The music is familiar. The story feels close enough to touch. And yet, before Christmas can arrive, the Church pauses here—not with angels in the sky, not with shepherds in the fields, not even with Mary's song—but with Joseph. With a man standing at the edge of a decision. With fear pressing in. With love asking something costly. The Fourth Sunday of Advent always slows us down at the threshold. It refuses to let us rush toward the manger without first reckoning with what it costs to say yes to God. It reminds us that before birth, there is risk. Before joy, there is vulnerability. Before incarnation, there is fear met with courage.

Joseph's fear is easy to overlook. Matthew does not linger on it. The story moves quickly toward dreams and obedience, lineage and fulfillment. But Joseph's fear is not abstract or theoretical. It is grounded in the real social, religious, and political costs of his world. To take Mary as his wife would expose him to public disgrace. To stand beside her would invite suspicion, judgment, and shame. His reputation, his standing, his future—all would be questioned.

And for Mary, the danger was even greater. In a world where women could be punished—sometimes violently—for suspected adultery, her pregnancy was not simply scandalous. It was life-threatening. Joseph knows this. He knows the law. He knows the risks. And so his initial plan—to dismiss her quietly—makes sense. It is cautious. It is lawful.

It minimizes harm. And yet, it is fear speaking. And if we're honest, it is a familiar voice. It is the fear that asks practical questions first: *What will people say? What will this cost me? How much of myself am I willing to risk?*

Joseph's fear is not malicious. It is not cruel. It is not even faithless. It is the fear of someone trying to survive within the rules of his world. And that is why this story belongs on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. Because Advent is not only about longing for God to come. It is about reckoning with what God's coming asks of us. Fear that wants to protect itself. Fear that seeks distance rather than connection. Fear that says, "I care, but not enough to risk everything."

What changes everything is not certainty—but encounter. A dream. A voice in the night. A word that does not deny the fear, but speaks directly into it: "Do not be afraid... for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Notice what the angel does not say. The angel does not erase the danger. The angel does not promise safety or ease or social approval. The angel does not say, "Everything will be fine." The angel simply names what is already true: God is at work here. Which leads to the question, **Where is God already at work in your life, in mine, in the life of College Hill?**

Neither Joseph nor we are asked to be fearless. He is not asked to be a hero. He is invited to trust that God's Presence is already woven into this fragile, complicated situation. Joseph could have stepped back. He could have protected himself. He could have let Mary bear the weight alone. Instead, Joseph steps in.

This is the turning point of the story. Not because the danger disappears. Not because the empire loosens its grip. But because one man chooses relationship over retreat. That choice stands before us as well. Joseph does not fix everything. He does not resolve the danger. But he chooses to share it. And in doing so, Joseph's obedience becomes more than personal righteousness. It becomes an act of courageous solidarity.

And courage, here, is not loud. It is not dramatic. It does not draw attention to itself. **Courage looks like choosing to stay.** It is as if he says—quietly, without fanfare—**"You don't have to go through this alone. Give me your hand."** **This is not saviorism. This is accompaniment. It is a theology of proximity—the conviction that faithfulness means drawing near to those who are vulnerable, aligning ourselves with those at risk, even when we ourselves are afraid.**

In a world shaped by empire, masculinity, and rigid honor-shame boundaries, Joseph's posture is striking. He lays aside patriarchal expectation. He resists legalistic judgment. He chooses relationship over reputation. And in that choice, the Gospel opens not with conquest or domination, but with a quiet act of resistance.

This story is not only personal. It is communal. It is structural. It is profoundly political. Herod is watching. Rome's puppet king knows how to deal with threats—deception, surveillance, violence. Any child rumored to be "King of the Jews" destabilizes the carefully maintained order. And yet God does not respond with force.

God responds with vulnerability. God entrusts the future of the world to a young woman and a man who is afraid but willing.

We might imagine a quiet moment between Mary and Joseph. Mary has already said yes to God. But that yes did not make her fearless. **Courage does not eliminate fear—it makes room to move through it. In Matthew's story, she still needs a companion. She still needs someone willing to walk beside her. And Joseph, stirred by a divine whisper, reaches through his own fear to offer his presence.**

This story, of course, is not only about them. During Advent, the Church dares to believe that this ancient story pressed directly into our present moment. There are people in our communities today who, like Mary, carry something sacred and heavy—something that places them at risk. Perhaps it is their identity. Perhaps it is their truth. Perhaps it is their body. Perhaps it is their calling, their hope, their future. They may not announce it. They may be carrying it quietly. But the risk is real. And the question Advent places before those of us with more safety is not, “*What do we believe?*” It is “**Who will we stand beside?**” And there are others—like Joseph—who hold more safety, more security, more voice.

Advent does not ask us simply to repeat the words “Do not be afraid.” Those words are not a command to suppress fear. They are an invitation to refuse fear its final authority. It asks us to act with love in the midst of fear. Not to fix everything. Not to be perfect. But to show up. To reach out. To say, “Give me your hand.” This is the love Isaiah imagines when he writes, “Each one helps the other, saying to one another, ‘Take courage!’ ... Do not fear, for I am with you.”

God's work in the world unfolds not through lone heroes, but through joined hands. Through people who choose relationship over self-protection, accompaniment over certainty, presence over perfection.

Mary's yes mattered. She consented to God's disruption of her life. But Joseph's yes mattered too. Because incarnation does not happen in isolation. God's promises take flesh in networks of human courage, in fragile webs of trust, in ordinary people deciding not to walk away. Our yes matters as well.

As we move into these final days of Advent – this thin space between promise and fulfillment – the questions before us are not abstract or sentimental: Who among us is carrying something sacred and heavy—perhaps putting oneself at risk? What fear might we be called to move through—not for our own sake, but for the sake of another? How might our fragile, imperfect love become the ground where God's promise takes root?

This week, as Christmas draws near, we are not asked to fix the world. We are asked to take each other's hands and walk forward into it—together.

Amen.