

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

December 22, 2024

**WORDS for the  
BEGINNING:  
Hope Is Worth the Risk**  
Dr. Jo Forrest



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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: December 22, 2024

## WORDS for the BEGINNING: Hope is Worth the Risk

When do we get to see the baby? Isn't that what Advent is about, preparing ourselves to embrace our savior?

This Advent season we are exploring those endings and new beginnings in our lives. From the distance of time, we can look back and draw tidy lines to differentiate between what was and recognize new birth. But at the moment when a break occurs, all the pain and uncertainty challenges us to know who we are.

The first Sunday reminded us of the blessings that no tragedy ever takes away – Isaiah tells us that God calls us “beloved.”

Next, we heard the story in Ruth that points to a time in the wilderness when two women felt alone and were then surprised by loyalty.

Last week's lesson from Isaiah asked the fundamental question – in the face of ruin, will I do what I can for the good of everyone?

Today, we will lean into the vulnerability inherent in that decision. When circumstances careen outside of our control, do we shrink with cynicism or risk hope?

We get closer to Jesus's birth today. Matthew's gospel opens with all his ancestors, beginning with Abraham and listing all the "fathers of" until we get to Joseph.

Embedded within this genealogy of the pillars of faith are the misfits, immigrants, and women of ill repute, without whom, the Hebrew people would have perished.

Their names convey the stories of ordinary people who made the tough decisions to do what God desires until we get to Joseph.

As surely as Joseph inherited Abraham's faith and Moses' courage, Joseph's ancestry portrays the capacity to be an agent in God's plan for salvation

*Dear God, we know you speak to us in quiet, ordinary, and sometimes shocking ways. In this story we think we know so well, help us to set aside our preconceived notions, our skepticism, so we can imagine Joseph's dilemma, and sense his fear. Help us hear this story so we learn to trust you when you speak to us today. Amen.*

Matthew 1:18-25

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

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"  
which means, "God is with us."

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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Without any speaking role in any gospel, we are tempted to sideline Joseph as a minor character in the history of

salvation. Yet the Gospel of Matthew begins with Joseph's pivotal decision.

As the story goes, this God-fearing carpenter wakes up one morning to learn his plans are shattered. His fiancé carries a child that could not be his and suddenly, his future seems bleak.

Always described as a righteous man, Joseph stands in a faith tradition that pursues life. That's what "righteous" means, doing the right thing by loving God and neighbor.

If he calls attention to Mary's pregnancy, she might forever be scorned, and her child called the nasty names we might hear whispered in parking lots and lunchroom cafeterias behind someone's back. Joseph makes up his mind to quietly dismiss her, sparing her public ridicule.

Contrary to the hypothesis often preached that Joseph's decision kept Mary from being executed, New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine cautions us to know that idea is wrong. Even if Joseph publicly broke off the engagement, the village would not have stoned Mary to death.



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The Rabbinic tradition always seeks to protect the welfare of children. Mary's family and the village would have found a way to care for her and her child, even if Joseph left.<sup>1</sup>

In today's climate of ever-increasing antisemitism, we need to stop these destructive ideas of Judaism and other falsehoods that promote the Christmas story as the only means of grace entering the world.

Long before the time of Jesus, our Jewish faith teaches us that God's mercy guides God's judgement. That's a crucial point to confront antisemitism and understand the theology that shaped Joseph's character.

As a man devoted to righteousness, Joseph sought to preserve life. Therein lies his quandary as a potential father. If he takes Mary as his wife, this child will be his heir, inheriting the privilege accorded to a first-born son, instead of his biological child.

Although not in the text, we can imagine his anguish at wondering how Mary conceived. Why was she unfaithful to him?

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<sup>1</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 121-122.

Why would this happen to a righteous man? If we sidestep these deeply human emotions erupting within him, we sanitize Joseph's consent and assume that accepting God's plan comes easily and without cost.<sup>2</sup>

In his vulnerable moment, God intervenes. For Joseph, it happens in a dream. For you and me God may speak when out walking, or a blurt from someone who speaks a truth more profound than even they know, or some message you receive with piercing clarity.

If we worry about the consequences of our decision in God's eyes, then we are open to God's guidance.

Right in the middle of wrestling with himself, Joseph hears "do not be afraid." That divine messenger knows that fear shuts down our ability to think and feel. Fear shuts down our willingness to take risks.

It can be costly to love and protect a child that is not your own.

Then he receives this subtle phrase that we could gloss over in light of Mary's mysterious pregnancy when an angel speaks: the whole purpose of Jesus' birth is to "save his people from their sin."

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<sup>2</sup> Debi Thomas, *Into the Mess & Other Jesus Stories* (Eugene, OR 2022) 11-13.

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With this, any personal desire Joseph may have felt for his first-born pales in comparison to the promise that if he fathers this child, he will participate in God's plan for our salvation.

In the context of the first century, to be saved from our sin concerns not just an individual list of errors, but the way we fail to live with one another as a community so everyone thrives.

The salvation to be birthed will counter the way people give power over to structures that subvert God's intent and how a whole society ignores God's justice and mercy.

Saving people from their sins concerns the moral courage for each of us to choose to be different, to hold values that always count each life as precious. Joseph's entire lineage and faith has taught him to welcome a messiah.<sup>3</sup> This child will be God wearing our skin.

But first, God needs Joseph's consent. If he says yes, he accepts the task of parenting God's future. Hasn't that been true throughout our faith history and even today?

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<sup>3</sup> Jane Patterson, "Preaching Christmas 2022," Backstory Preaching, December 8, 2022, lecture notes.

Usually, any step towards healing our world from societal injustice, hatred, or bigotry, or worshiping other gods, or any of the ways we seem stuck in patterns that harm others, begins with a deeply personal encounter with another flesh and blood human.

Usually, any step towards our collective salvation begins by seeing the vulnerability of someone and feeling our own vulnerability.

To dismiss Mary quietly would have kept Joseph safe. Instead, he exercised hope. “Exercised” is the only verb to place next to “hope”.

Hope is not some flimsy attitude, nor does it depend upon the actions of others. At the moment you see the end of what was, the willingness to exercise hope creates a new beginning. It may commit you to the equivalent of a long marathon that leaves you exhausted, but it is the only way to be part of God’s salvation.

Hope fuels us. In the ideas of theologian Jurgen Moltmann: hope causes us to act. It takes us not from rest but into unrest, not patience but impatience. Hope does not calm the unquiet heart but is itself the unquiet heart in us. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is. They persist

against all the lies and exercise the hope from an ancient story of God with us.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph makes the risky choice to stay with Mary. I wish the Gospels offered more about the role he played in the life of young Jesus. After Mary and Joseph find their precocious 12-year-old in the temple educating the educators, Joseph drops entirely from history.

But we know this: the fearless love that Jesus talks about, the love he stood for and dies for, is the same rule-changing, sheltering, protecting love that Joseph demonstrated. Joseph's story teaches us we are part of the world changing, each time we exercise hope for a better future.

What compels you to care for a child beyond your immediate family? With all the chaos in the world, do you even want to? If we hope that God will save us, then we must be willing to set aside our fear of what God might call us to do.

Maybe exercising hope brings us to risk the ridicule of saying "no more to gun violence" when the mere mention of "gun" puts others on guard. Or to work to end climate change for the next generation in an economy focused on the price at the pump. Or advocate to educate every child in ways that

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<sup>44</sup> Jugen Moltmann *Theology of Hope*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 23.

stimulate their minds to think. Or find a way so children do not go to bed hungry.

God calls each of us in some personal and immediate way to be a part of the world's salvation, revealed in Jesus, and first nurtured by Joseph. God asks us to take a personal stake in the lives of others, to do something alarmingly different than we thought we could. Hope thrives when we decide to hold the precarious, the fragile, the vulnerable, the impossible.

Aware of this risk, and given this promise, do you want to continue on the path to the manger and greet this infant God? It may cost you. It may be the decision that saves your life.





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