

**Matthew 1: 18-25**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**December 21, 2025**  
**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

Let's start a Calvary Spotify playlist of songs referenced in sermons. You'll get a wide variety of offerings, a little Diana Ross, maybe Wesley's own rendition of "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," Scott added some Tom Waits just last week. From me, you'll almost always get Paul Simon lyrics, as he is the greatest songwriter of the twentieth century and early twenty-first - a claim I will defend to the last. On a lesser-known track from the extraordinary Graceland album, "Crazy Love" we get these beautiful and terrible lines: "Somebody could walk into this room and say, 'Your life is on fire, it's all over the evening news, all about the fire in your life on the evening news,'" and then its chorus, "I don't want no part of this crazy love. I don't want no part of your love."

Joseph, we are told, is afraid. He has a long laundry list of fears. Near the top must be that his life is on fire *and* that everyone knows, that it's all over the evening news. He thought, perhaps, he would marry a nice girl, settle down in a good neighborhood, and set up his carpentry shop. He thought, perhaps, he'd not attract much attention, nor, as we all wish, face much hardship. Instead, all that he carefully counted is lost, as another poet wrote. His betrothed is pregnant, and it's not his, and the flames of spectacle and speculation are licking at his door. What will the neighbors say? How can he explain this turn of events when he barely understands it himself? How can he protect her from ridicule or much, much worse?

The temptation to distance himself from all of this is obvious and strong. His world, his future is crumbling in front of him, and the practical thing to do is to run from the burning building, to get as far from the wreckage as possible. Can't you just imagine him singing, I mean saying, "I don't want no part of this crazy love. I don't want no part of your love?" We'd understand it too, right? We'd understand and maybe even excuse him if he walked away from Mary at this moment. We'd actually give him a little credit for trying to do it all quietly, to protect her and maybe himself, by just whispering goodbye on his way out the door, avoiding the camera crews and the nosy neighbors. It is a crazy and bewildering moment. And it's actually even wilder below the surface; the assumptions about Mary's possible unfaithfulness and the embarrassment and humiliation of such a seemingly public betrayal are only the beginning.

Because below the surface, there's even more strangeness than the regular soap opera drama and rumors. "She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." I've always taken it for granted that the angel was the one to clue Joseph in on the idea that this wasn't a regular-old scandal, but somehow godly. But in the order of events presented by Matthew, it appears that it was known - perhaps even to Joseph - that this pregnancy was somehow of God, even before the angel comes to him in a dream. That knowledge, however it might have been received or interpreted or understood, comes at the top of the story, and is part of the calculus of his moving away from her, however gently he might be trying to get out of this strange story. So, when Joseph is singing along that he wants no part of this crazy love, he's rejecting not only his

betrothed and beloved but also rejecting any involvement with this strange and unpredictable God. He's not just trying to get out of his engagement to her; like so many others in this book of sacred stories of ours, he is trying to get away from an entanglement with God.

And again, who can really blame him, or any of the others who thought they could slip away from the crazy love of God? We've been hiding from or arguing with or running out on God all along, from Adam to Moses to Jonah and beyond. Because, as it turns out, getting involved with God is ultimately not the way toward a settled-down kind of life with no turmoil or trouble. Getting involved with God can bring a sense of companionship and trust, but it's just as likely to bring along discomfort and challenge, and even disarray. You might feel, sometimes, like your life is on fire.

Waking up and claiming Mary means that Joseph is waking up to claim a lifetime of curious stares and whispered commentary, but that may be the least of his trials. Waking up and claiming God, too, means that his life will be irrevocably changed in countless ways. The angel in the dream hints that after this first, hard step of standing with Mary, there will be more challenges ahead. We don't see or hear much more about Joseph in the narrative that follows, but surely he watched this child grow and wondered what it might mean to be the one to save the people. Surely his heart ached when he came to understand what a wild and dangerous path was laid out before this little baby. We don't know if Joseph was around to hear the echoes of his own doubt and confusion in Jesus' quiet prayer to let this cup pass, the momentary glimpse that the crazy love of God is too demanding even for him. Whatever Joseph witnessed or ultimately understood, this moment of choice on this morning to stay with Mary and to stay with God will reverberate through his remaining days.

Friends, there's a sweetness to the stories we will hear this week, a beauty and a profound tenderness. There is comfort that comes from knowing that God shows up as a precious baby, into every precious life. And at the edges, there is also a reminder that we're not wrong to feel a bit wary at getting too close, at getting entangled with this God. When we are entwined and engaged with God, things will be asked of us... different callings for each of us to be sure. But if we wake up resolved to choose a relationship with God, we can be fairly certain that we'll be asked to do things that might make the neighbors talk, that might push us toward people we'd otherwise avoid, that we'll be asked to stand up for truths that aren't popular or even sensible. I hate to say it, but sometimes it might even look like our lives are on fire.

If you come back tonight for Lessons & Carols, and I hope you will, you'll hear more of these stories and also some gorgeous music and a few poems. Toward the end, we'll share a couple of lines from a much longer poem by W.H. Auden. If we were able to read the whole length of his oratorio, you'd hear more from our man Joseph, whose world is going up in smoke and who has to make a decision. You won't hear this part tonight, but this is how it goes in that poem, "to choose what is difficult all one's days / as if it were that easy, that is faith. Joseph praise." Praise - as in commend him, not the verb to get on your knees. "To choose what is difficult all one's days / as if it were that easy, that is faith. Joseph praise." Joseph wakes one morning after a restless night with a dream and an angel hovering in his hazy consciousness. He decides to turn toward Mary and toward God; he decides to turn toward the blaze, toward the crazy love. Difficult, not at all easy, but faithful. Us too. We see in his story a bit of a warning, but also an invitation to be loved by a love so wild and strange. Let us praise then this patron saint of difficult choices and the lifelong embrace of a demanding, challenging, crazy love.