

“Give Me Your Hand”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, December 21, 2025

Texts: Jeremiah 1: 4-10 and Luke 1: 26-39

Imagine the conversation between Mary and Joseph. We skip over this part of the birth narrative every single year. Maybe it is because Joseph is so quiet and resolves to do what we believe is the “right thing” regarding Mary and Jesus. Maybe we skip over it because it makes us uncomfortable. We like to think that everyone just does what God tells them to do without question or pause. We also ignore the real danger to Mary and to Joseph both literally and to their reputation. Maybe we skip over it because Joseph is easy to ignore, or challenges our ideal of manhood, or for some other reason. Nevertheless, he is integral to this story. Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, our companion for this study of fear this Advent, reminds us that, “[Mary] has already said yes to God. But that yes didn’t make her fearless. She still needs a companion. She still needs someone to walk beside her. And Joseph, moved by divine whisper, reaches through his own fear to offer his presence...Advent invites us not simply to “be not afraid,” but to act with love in the midst of fear. Not to fix everything, but to show up with courage. To reach out and say: “Give me your hand.” In essence, this is what Joseph did. It is possible that he has the most to teach us for such a fearful time as this...that the offer of a hand might be the most important thing we can do this Christmas and into the New Year.

Think about Matthew’s version of this story. Mary is “found” to be pregnant. It’s odd language. It’s like she was hiding it somewhere. Who found out? Who told on her? I’ve

always found that language strange. I think it's much more likely that Mary, knowing she was pregnant and that it was not Joseph's, knew that the first thing she must do is talk with him about it. She had to be as scared as anyone could be. We often fail to understand the deep patriarchy of their society. Joseph had all the power, and by conventional standards, he "owned" Mary's future. No one would have blamed him if he not only left her but wanted her stoned to death for her "indiscretion." Agree with it or not, that was the reality of those days in ancient Palestine.

Mary tells this story about a visit from an angel, impregnation by the Holy Spirit, and her choice to go ahead with the pregnancy with all she had to lose, including Joseph, and possibly her life. Imagine yourself being Joseph and hearing this crazy story. What would you do? How would you respond? You haven't yet had your visit from an angel. Your faith and your community make it clear what you—as a man—should do. Even so, we get a glimpse of Joseph's character when he decides to "dismiss her quietly." In the words of Dr. Lee, "In a world defined by empire, masculinity, and honor-shame boundaries, Joseph's posture is striking..." To say the least! Dr. Lee continues, "The Gospel [of Matthew] opens with a quiet act of resistance: Joseph lays aside patriarchal expectation and legalistic judgment, choosing instead to protect Mary and the unborn child. In doing so, he becomes a quiet, but vital part of God's liberating plan...Joseph becomes not only a guardian of Mary's dignity, but a protector of Jesus' life." He becomes a hero of the story, and no one seems to notice, nor care. Maybe that's the mark of a true hero?

I'd like to explore this more with you. This time using the article published in 2022 in *Premier Christianity* by Michael Frost entitled *Joseph's silent submission to Mary's God-*

given calling is real biblical manhood

([https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/josephs-silent-submission-to-marys-god-](https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/josephs-silent-submission-to-marys-god-given-calling-is-real-biblical-manhood/14578.article)

[given-calling-is-real-biblical-manhood/14578.article](https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/josephs-silent-submission-to-marys-god-given-calling-is-real-biblical-manhood/14578.article)). In the middle of the article, he speaks of Joseph's experience and the fact that there is no biblical record of him ever saying a word.

[Joseph's] betrothed is pregnant and the child is not his. The shame this would bring upon a man in such a society as his was enormous. He must have felt the hot rush of blood the courses through us when we are humiliated.

Did he feel a howl of indignation rise in his throat? Publicly disowning the child and disavowing the woman would be the least most men would do. Legally, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death...

In a society as patriarchal as Joseph's, it would have not been considered untoward for him to shout out his rage, to lash out at Mary for disgracing him. Yet, in his goodness, Joseph is silent...with Joseph, everything is quiet...

Quietly, Joseph cared for Mary. Quietly, he raised the child and named him Jesus. Quietly, he believed and acted.

Everyone in Luke's Gospel version of this story seems to have a song to sing and a story to tell. Joseph is barely mentioned. And yet here, quietly, Joseph makes all the difference. Well, he does so alongside Mary and others. The prophet Isaiah, in our reading for today, reminds us that "Each one helps the other, saying to one another, 'Take courage!' ...Do not fear, for I am with you." (Isaiah 41: 6,10). "God's work unfolds not through lone heroes, but through the joined hands of those who choose: relationship over self-protection, accompaniment over certainty, and presence over perfection. Mary's 'yes' mattered. So did Joseph's. So does ours."

And don't forget, this is all overshadowed by the Herodians we talked about a few weeks ago. Matthew, in stark contrast to Luke, makes sure that we know that Herod is

always watching. Any child born “King of the Jews” challenges the status quo. Herod’s response—deception, surveillance, and eventually violence (Matthew 2:16)—follows a similar imperial pattern.” Another way to say it is that Joseph and Mary aren’t done making choices to protect this child born out of wedlock. No, they will have to choose to run to another country to save Jesus from Herod (we’ll talk about that more later), and they’ll have to choose to go hand in hand on a dangerous journey that will last at least 33 years. We see moments in time in the biblical narrative, but we don’t really get the full picture of the dedication of these two to each other, to Jesus, and to something far greater than themselves. All this, and Joseph is never to be heard from again when our Christmas pageants are over. In fact, he’s not heard from in the pageants, or in our Bible. He’s silent and never says a word.

However, he models for us the kind of love—grounded in risk, humility, and faith—that Isaiah evokes. Through Joseph, we are reminded, “not simply to ‘be not afraid’ but to act with love in the midst of fear.” Again, we’re not here to fix everything. Joseph didn’t fix everything. He did what was his to do, and what he had the power to do. The rest of it, he and Mary did together...sometimes alone, and sometimes with help. Sometimes the running refugee, and other times, the quiet presence that is later embodied by Jesus as he says nothing when we could have said everything at his trial. Power does not always mean that we have a bullhorn to tell the world of our power. Real power comes from knowing that something is greater than us and participating in God’s inauguration and ultimate fulfillment of the kingdom of which our Bible speaks frequently and we pray for every week.

New Testament scholar and missionary Kenneth Bailey writes of Joseph: “In his cameo appearance, Matthew presents Joseph as a human being of remarkable spiritual stature. He possesses the boldness, daring, courage and strength of character to stand up against his entire community to take Mary as his wife. He did so in spite of the forces that no doubt wanted her stoned. His vision of justice stayed his hand. In short, he was able to re-process his anger into grace.” Michael Frost goes on to say, “This is the very work Jesus will do at the end of his life. Jesus too will re-process his pain and anger into the supreme act of grace, dying for those who betrayed him...In this respect, Joseph is a forerunner of greater things that his adopted son will do. He receives his calling from God and he resolutely obeys.”

The point here is not whether we stay quiet or we are vocal in the midst of our pain. The point is that Joseph had a calling and he is a different model of manhood from his contemporaries and from many today. Regardless of where we land, it’s important that we take seriously Joseph’s commitment to Mary, to Jesus, and ultimately to God. Though he may not have ever said, “Take my hand,” he certainly offered it to Mary. Together, hand-in-hand, they changed the world. Imagine what we could do if we offered our hand in honor of our God-given calling, and faced the challenges the world gives us? What difference could we make if we encountered our fear together with someone else and with trepidation, but also with resolution, followed God into the unknown?

Like I say virtually every week, what is ours to do? Can we learn anything from Joseph about how we might do it?

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.