

4th SUNDAY OF ADVENT – A (December 18, 2022)

[I invite you to use your imagination with me today: let's go back over 1900 years ago to Judea, a small backwater part of the Roman empire. We are watching someone about to write a letter; he can't see us, but we can read over his shoulder as he begins.]

My dear friend,

First, I must apologize for not writing to you for such a long time. But I have some amazing things to tell you! First, do you remember when we were kids how we'd talk about the great heroes of our past—Abraham, Moses, King David, and all the rest? And how the Savior that God had promised for so long would be a descendant of David? Since both of our families are descendants of David, we used to wonder if we'd ever know or meet this Savior. Well, you'll never guess what has happened...

The time came for me (and you as well) to assume the responsibilities of adulthood. I rejoiced when I was engaged to a beautiful young woman named Mary—beautiful in appearance, but even more so in spirit and goodness. Anyway, the marriage contract was drawn up but I had not yet taken her into my house (the action which solemnizes a marriage). In the meantime, I was shocked to learn that she was already with child! I refused to believe that she could be unfaithful to me but I had no idea what was going on. I just knew for certain that I was not the child's father. I could have turned her over to the religious authorities, but they might have condemned her to death for adultery—and there's no way I wanted that to happen. People always thought I was such a 'just man'; I don't know about that, but I just couldn't turn her in.

Anyway, I had decided to send her away quietly by repudiating the marriage contract. All I had to do was sign a declaration to that effect; I didn't even have to give any reasons for doing so. I just thought this was way beyond my understanding. I was all set to do so until...my friend, do you ever have dreams where you think someone is trying to tell you something? Well, that's just what happened to me. Someone spoke to me in a dream (an angel, perhaps?) and said not to be afraid to take Mary as my wife because her child was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. I was to name her Son Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

My friend, do you understand what I'm saying? Not only would I know the Savior, but I would be the one to give him his name! You know that naming a child is the responsibility of the father—and so, even though I am not the child's natural father, I would serve as his guardian, a 'foster-father' of sorts. What an astonishing thing: the Savior is to come to earth as a tiny, helpless baby! Hardly the glorious coming in divine majesty that we were all expecting...

So I took Mary into my home and we became husband and wife. We had to go to Bethlehem for a census ordered by the emperor; it was annoying, but we had no choice. When we finally got there, we stayed in a stable (all the inns were full) and it was there that Mary gave birth. What a place for the Messiah to be born! I'll never forget gazing with wonder at that little baby boy nestled in the arms of his mother—love simply radiated from her; she nearly glowed. You know how new mothers are—thinking their baby is the most beautiful and special child in all the world. Well, in this case that was indeed the truth.

Later on I had another one of those dreams, but this one was awful. I was told that King Herod wanted this child to be killed. Why? Why such insane jealousy? What a pathetic man he must have been—so power-hungry, and yet feeling so threatened by a baby. We moved to Egypt for some time for safety sake until we learned that Herod was dead and so our child was safe, so we moved back to Nazareth. This was almost too much for me to handle; this isn't how I would have planned for the Savior's arrival into our world! Then I remembered from Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." I guess God does know what he's doing after all; he is and must be in control. Who am I to demand that he explain his plans to me in every detail??

I still don't know why the Lord ever chose me to be Jesus' earthly guardian and the husband of his dear mother Mary, and maybe I never will. But that's OK—God knows what he's doing; this is all part of his marvelous and providential plan that we neither have to or are able to fully understand. It's enough for me to do what he wants me to do.

Well, my friend, it has been a long day and I need to bring this letter to a close. Never, ever forget all the good God has done for you, for me, and for all his people—the entire human race and family. Rejoice in his compassion and love and praise his mighty name—for his mercy indeed endures forever.

Your friend from long ago,
Joseph—the one they call 'the carpenter'