

“Being a Joseph”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ December 21, 2025

Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25

You’ve probably met someone who owns one of those inflatable Christmas lawn decorations—the kind that promise holiday cheer in a box. You open the package expecting a majestic snowman or a flying reindeer, and instead you’re greeted by a heap of crumpled nylon that looks like a jellyfish that’s given up on life.

One family plugged theirs in on a windy December afternoon, and the thing kept folding in on itself like it was shy. Every few minutes a gust would come along and—whoosh—down it went again. The neighborhood children gathered, wide-eyed, contemplating the mystery of why inflatable holiday joy seemed to be suffering from low self-esteem.

Sometimes Christmas feels exactly like that deflated decoration.

We want the glow of candlelight and harmony, and instead we get tangled lights, frayed nerves, complicated family dynamics, and a to-do list long enough to stretch from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

And if we’re honest, beneath all the glitter and jingles, a lot of people are carrying private griefs, old disappointments, fresh anxieties, budgets stretched tight, and hearts stretched tighter.

Christmas is beautiful, yes, but it can also be hard.

And that’s why Joseph is such a gift to us.

Joseph isn’t loud in Scripture. He doesn’t give speeches, lead armies, or sing solos in the pageant. Instead, he listens. He ponders. He acts with compassion even while his heart is aching.

He faces disappointment.

He faces confusion.

He faces a future he didn’t choose for himself.

And into that storm, God speaks—not with thunder but with a dream.
“JOSEPH... DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

Grace arrives quietly.

Joseph’s greatness wasn’t in his titles or skills.

It was in his willingness to listen, to trust, and to do the next good thing.

God speaks in many ways—and most of them arrive as softly as the angel in Joseph’s dream. We just need to listen and recognize that it is God speaking to us.

1. God speaks through stillness.

Sometimes the divine voice comes when we pause long enough to notice the tug on our heart. The world shouts: God often whispers.

A quiet moment in the early morning.

A walk in the cold air.

A pause before reacting.

The breath between one thought and another.

This is the space where God often slips in.

2. God speaks through Scripture.

Not as a rulebook dropped from heaven but as the ongoing conversation between God and God’s people.

When we read the stories, we begin to recognize God’s tone—always leaning toward mercy, always leaning toward courage, always leaning toward love.

3. God speaks through conscience shaped by love.

That nudge to apologize.

That prompting to help someone.

That sense that fear is not the right response and compassion is.

We sometimes call it intuition, or conscience, or the “small voice”—but Scripture calls it God’s Spirit bearing witness inside us.

4. God speaks through people.

Not just the wise and holy ones, but the everyday ones:

- A friend who says, “I’m praying for you.”
- A child who hands you a picture they drew “just because.”
- Someone who forgives you.
- Someone who needs your presence.

God sounds a lot like love when God speaks through others.

When we look at Joseph, we discover a man who NEVER preached a sermon, NEVER wrote a psalm, NEVER stood in the spotlight—yet changed the world simply by being faithful in the shadows. He reminds us that holiness is not always loud or dramatic. More often, it is the steady kindness of someone who stays when things get complicated, who listens when life is confusing, who chooses love when fear is easier.

And in every town, in every church, in every neighborhood, the world is waiting for people like that. Quiet helpers. Gentle encouragers. Everyday saints carry grace the way Joseph carried hope. Being a Joseph isn’t about grand gestures; it’s about the posture of the heart.

Being a Joseph might look like coming alongside someone who is overwhelmed. There are people all around us carrying invisible loads—parents stretched thin, coworkers drowning in responsibilities, neighbors who haven’t said out loud just how tired they are. Sometimes the most Christ-like thing we can do is to make their burden just a little lighter: delivering a meal or simply listening carefully as they sort through the knots in their day. These small acts of mercy echo Joseph’s quiet courage.

Being a Joseph can also mean choosing grace in moments of conflict. Joseph could have reacted in anger or humiliation, but instead he breathed, paused, and reached for kindness. When disagreements rise and tempers shorten—especially in the pressure cooker of the holiday season, our calling is to be the steady hand in the storm. A calm answer, a patient response, a refusal to escalate harshness—these are the ways we carry Joseph’s spirit into modern life.

Sometimes being a Joseph means noticing the person who feels alone. In every sanctuary and every family gathering, there are folks that feel that they are on

the outside looking in. Joseph made space for Mary when the world had no room; we can make space for the ones who sit on the margins. A warm invitation, a shared table, a thoughtful text that says, “You matter”—these simple gestures turn the coldest night into holy ground.

Being a Joseph might be standing beside someone who is afraid. Fear has many disguises—financial worries, health uncertainties, family struggles, futures that feel foggy. We steady someone else’s trembling heart with our presence. Sometimes a shoulder to lean on, or a steady voice saying “I’m here with you”—that becomes the very channel through which God’s courage flows.

In all these ways, we become conduits of the same quiet strength, the same steadfast love, the same listening heart that Joseph offered on that first Christmas. And through people like that—people like us—Christ continues to arrive in the world.

In a Christmas pageant—just one of those ordinary ones where shepherds lose their headpieces and stars shed glitter—Joseph stood quietly beside Mary.

The innkeeper, full of confidence (and caffeine), shouted,
“NO ROOM!”

Mary looked startled.

The audience laughed.

Joseph froze, forgetting his line.

Then, moved by something better than rehearsal, he placed a gentle hand on Mary’s shoulder and said:

“We’ll find a place.

I’m with you.”

It was not a line from the script, but straight from the heart of the story.

In that small sanctuary, people felt it:

This is what Christmas is.

This is what grace sounds like.

This is the work of Joseph—and of all who follow in his quiet footsteps.

The Invitation

This season, someone near you is facing a hard Christmas.

Someone is afraid.

Someone is weary.

Someone is carrying more than they can say.

And God may send a dream, or a nudge, or a whisper straight into your soul:

“Do not be afraid. Be the one who brings grace.”

Be the calm presence.

Be the steady heart.

Be the person who says,

“There is room. You are not alone.”

Be a Joseph. Amen.