

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
December 23, 2007  
Fourth Sunday of Advent

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

## NEVER ALONE

Have you ever noticed what it's like when you ask someone to do something? This is a big thing in our house. You can get really different responses out there in the world. If you make a little request for help—if you give a directive—what you hope to see is openness. What you hope to experience is confidence that you've been understood and acceptance of that very request. That's the best response you can give. But what do you experience when you make a simple request? Excuses—lots of excuses.

What about if you ask someone to believe; or even more, what if you ask someone to act upon a statement of fact? Do you say, this is wrong, we need to correct this? You don't want to have to explain every possibility, every eventuality. Have I told you that usually when I proclaim the Word of God, I'm proclaiming it to Carl because I need to hear it most, I need to hear it first? So, those of you who know me, know this could be a pet peeve of mine. If something is wrong, we need to fix it. I have a new friend and yesterday we spent a couple of hours working on something. When we stood back and looked at it, we knew that it wasn't right. So we spent a couple of more hours taking it down and putting it up right. We knew it was wrong, just when we stood back.

Today we have this wonderful dream in Matthew about Joseph. Let's not be nice—he's going to dump Mary. That's what he's going to do; he's going to get rid of her. That would have been the right thing to do, but it would have been so wrong. Do you ever have dreams about something that is upsetting you? Do you ever have those times at night when you are sure you are asleep, but when you wake up you find out that maybe you weren't as asleep as you thought; or when your nicely planned life has been invaded with circumstances that you just never planned to go through?

That may be why we actually dream. We feel the weight of some decision; we feel the burden of broken promises. For at least a moment, let us admit that unlike our Christmas plays where everybody has something to say and something to do except Joseph; real life for Jesus our Savior, for just a moment, relied on the shoulders of Joseph. Christmas hung in the balance, save Joseph's willingness to listen. Joseph had a dream. But if you'd have been Joseph, you'd have seen it more like a nightmare. Our dreams prepare us for the worst that life can throw at us. The only difference for Joseph is, it wasn't just a dream—it all came through. The potential life disasters that he faced weren't manageable like ours. We have some choices, usually. His only choice was to not do what he was prone to do. The only way he could manage his circumstance was to admit that it was unmanageable. Let's be honest, most of us worry about things and have dreams about things that don't ever happen.

So this Christmas, if you are feeling just a bit dejected before Christmas Eve, I'd like us to do a Scripture check. I always try to balance this Bible on the pulpit so that I can get to it in case I get lost. Is work or family or school or your career or a relationship just not going like you had hoped? Listen to the angel. Joseph, your fiancé is pregnant. Good news, it isn't yours. Bad news, you are still going to get married, right now.

Scripture check. Are you feeling a little lonely, depressed? Is the holiday gloom swarming around you? Yes, Joseph, Mary is with child and you get to walk around pretending that it's yours. But when you go home at night, the three of us will know that he's the long-awaited Messiah. What's that Joey? Sure, you can tell your friends, be my guest.

Scripture check. Do family get-togethers fall way short of the Courier and Ives holidays that you've come to expect—the images that you received in the mail only yesterday? Yes, Joseph, I want you to take Mary with you to your home town. I know it isn't a normal family reunion; this is one of those Roman government-forced census get-togethers. It's tough. Yes, I want you to introduce her to your relatives. No, don't leave her behind in Nazareth. Take her with you to Bethlehem. That's it, Joseph, take her with you. Be a good father. Don't leave her alone; don't leave them alone—never alone. Be with them the way God is coming to be with us. Yes, Joseph, I know what Immanuel means—God with us. Yes, I know Jesus means God saves us from the danger of being alone. Yes, maybe it does mean God saves us from being on our own the way the Messiah has come to save the world from being on its own. Then those final instructions, added beyond the prophet Isaiah by the skillful writer, Matthew. Name him Jesus. Yes, Jesus, like every other kid in Nazareth. Name him Jesus. Name him and remember to protect him by giving him your name. What would it mean if you gave your family's identity completely over to Jesus? Never alone; don't leave them alone. And don't forget the prophet's words: a virgin shall give birth. They'll laugh at it later, Joseph; but honor the fact that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Keep her pure.

The gospel of Luke gets lots of air time, but maybe Matthew has the greater message that life isn't always so perfect. What would it be like if there were a few more obedient and acceptable responses to God's Word? What would it be like in your home if obedience and acceptance to God's truth was a priority? What would it be like in our congregation if we had a few more people willing to be righteous and compassionate? When did that become an either/or? Was it sometime after the Messiah that we said, "I think I'll be compassionate, but forget the rules?" Or maybe it's just of late when it seemed we either had to choose righteousness or compassion? They were incarnate in one; they were always meant to be what we called salvation. When will it be that people can be counted upon again because they know that real life isn't always perfect, and that sometimes you have to stand back and say, "It's just not right, we have to start over."

Forgive me if this is just my experience, but if unreliable people are life's greatest disappointments, could it be that reliable people are life's greatest treasures after all? What would it be like in our culture today if real problems were met by people who could simply take instructions and respond openly, confidently, and with acceptance that God is right here facing their problems with them?

Yes, Joseph, just one last word. Go to your Christmas celebration, that special place—the “inn,” they will call it later. That place for guests; go to that place, and when you get there, it is already going to be full. So stay downstairs with the rest of the family. But Joseph, don’t forget, you can’t leave Mary alone. Never alone.

Go to Christmas and expect Jesus, but know that sometimes our best preparation would be to take on the character and the strength of a Joseph. Go to Christmas but regain that genuine spirit that comes to us and says, I want to be specific in your life. You can’t live the way you’ve already worked out. It has to be different. We have to face your problems together and we have to be counted on. You, Joseph, and me, the Holy Spirit. There isn’t anybody else I can go to. Let’s do this together. Let’s make it right for Jesus. Amen.