Believing the Unbelievable
A Sermon by The Rev. Winston W. Welty
Advent 4A, Matthew 1:18–25, 12/19/10

In Lewis Carroll’s classic book Through the Looking Glass, the White Queen advises Alice to practice believing six impossible things before breakfast every day. As Christmas approaches, I think that’s pretty good advice for us Christians. How else are we supposed to prepare ourselves for the preposterous story we’re about to hear again, the story of how God decided to abandon heaven for earth, trading power and glory for diapers and a teething ring? And how Jesus’ mother could not say how it happened, exactly, although His mother’s husband knew for sure it had nothing whatsoever to do with him?

Matthew tells us Joseph was “a righteous man,” and based on his actions he was apparently a kind one too. Whatever he believed about his young fiancée, he was unwilling to shame her, either by putting her on public trial, or by muddying her name to clear his own. So he resolved to “dismiss her quietly,” without blame, and was on the verge of doing so when “an angel of the Lord” started whispering in his ear—giving him several unbelievable things to believe before breakfast—and nothing was ever the same again. Somewhere in this divine shuffle, Joseph’s sense of right and wrong got lost or reduced to insignificance; his righteousness gave way to God’s righteousness. He believed what he heard in a dream, and he and Mary became husband and wife.
But Christian tradition has never quite known what to do with Joseph. He disappears from the narrative before Jesus is baptized and is never heard from again, which may support the legend that he was already an old man when he took Mary for his wife. That’s what you see in most religious art: a balding, grizzled old man dozing off to the side somewhere with his chin on his walking stick while the whole world adores young Mary and her Child. In some paintings he sits near her with a shoe off and a bare foot, snipping his long woolen stocking into a warm wrap for Jesus. In others, he cups a slender candle in his hand, protecting its fragile fire from the wind while over here his wife and Child glow with their own celestial light, his earthbound flame feeble against their heavenly radiance. In art he always seems to be lingering just beyond the edge of the golden sphere enveloping them—the kindly old man in the dark, an extra in the drama starring Madonna and Child.

In most depictions of the Annunciation he’s nowhere to be seen, because Luke’s Gospel is the most popular choice for that story, and he’s completely absent from Luke’s narrative. In the usual stained glass window renderings of the Annunciation it’s just Mary and Gabriel—Mary a girl dressed all in blue clutching a white lily to her breast as the bright angel bursts in upon her, a gilded scroll issuing from his lips: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

But not according to Matthew. In his version of the Annunciation it’s Joseph in the stained glass window, an old man in a brown homespun robe, snoring softly,
lying on his pallet fast asleep with his mouth slightly open as the same angel whispers in his ear:

*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the Child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you are to name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*

Of course that won’t all fit in a stained glass window, so there’s just the beginning of it: *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid…”*

That *“son of David”* part is important. The prophets all said Messiah would be a descendant of David, so if Mary’s baby is to be Messiah He has to be counted as Joseph’s child as well as Mary’s. Paul insists on it in today’s second reading, and Matthew’s convinced the prophets had it right. So for Matthew the Annunciation of Jesus’ birth is all about Joseph. There’s no Mary in the picture at all, no lily, no *Magnificat*, no *“Let it be with me according to your word.”* As Matthew tells the story Mary has no lines at all because she’s not there. For Matthew, Joseph has his own part to play in the drama of divine birth, a part that turns out to be our part, too, and essential to our understanding of Christmas.

According to Matthew—and of paramount importance to us—the whole grand experiment hangs on Joseph’s response. If Joseph believes the angel, believes his dream, then everything’s on, we’re “go” for liftoff, and the story can continue. Mary will have a home and a family and her Child will be born the son of David. According to the Law, the Child is Joseph’s until he says otherwise.
Whether or not his own genes are involved, he becomes father of the Child the moment he says so, because the issue’s not biological but legal. Jewish Law says: “If someone says, ‘This is my son,’ he is so attested.” But if Joseph doesn’t believe, then everything grinds to a halt. If he wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes on to the courthouse, then Mary’s an outcast forever—either killed by her family for disgracing them and herself, or disowned by them and left to scratch out her living however she can, feeding herself and her illegitimate Child on whatever she can beg or steal.

So the question on which Christmas depends is this: Will Joseph claim the Child or not? Will he believe the impossible and give the unbelievable a home inside himself, or will he stick with what makes sense and let the miracle go hungry? As far as Matthew’s concerned, Joseph’s belief is just as crucial to the story as Mary’s womb. God and all the angels are on her side, but it takes both Mary and Joseph to give birth to this remarkable Child: Mary to give Him life, and Joseph to give Him a Name: Jesus, son of David, from whose line Messiah would come.

Now I understand, of course, that this issue of legitimacy sounds a bit quaint in an age when people routinely raise children without benefit of marriage. But the heart of this story is much bigger and more profound than that. The heart of the story is about a just man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his fiancée pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. It’s about
“a righteous man” who surveys a mess he’s done absolutely nothing to create, but who nevertheless decides to believe God is present in the middle of that mess. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a cleaner, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife, Joseph doesn’t do that. He claims the scandal and gives it his name. He owns the mess—he legitimates it—and the mess becomes the place where Messiah is born.

There’s not much more to say, but I’ll say it anyway. That quiet, peripheral old man—the one with the missing sock and the candle wax on his sleeve—he’s the one to watch, because he’s our representative, the one in the story who’s most like us: presented day by day by day with circumstances beyond our control, with lives we might never have chosen for ourselves, tempted to divorce ourselves from it all, when somehow an angel whispers in our ears, “Don’t be afraid. God is here. It may not be the life you wanted or the life you had planned, but God can be born here too, *if* you will permit it.”

That “if” is the real shocker—that God’s “yes” depends on our “yes,” that God’s birth requires human partners—a Mary, a Joseph, a you, and a me—willing to believe the unbelievable, willing to claim the scandal, to adopt it and give it our names, accepting the whole sticky mess and rocking it in our arms: our lives just as they are, our losses that will never become gains, our God who comes in ways we would rather not accept. And it’s not just each of us alone, but the whole Church of
God, living in a world that seems to have run amuck, and proclaiming over and over again to anyone who will listen that God is still with us, and that as long as we do not divorce ourselves from them, God is still being born in our messes and through our messes, within and among those who will still believe what angels tell them in their dreams.

When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but knew her not until she had borne a son; and he named Him Jesus.