

DECEMBER 21, 2025

BELIEVING WITH HIS TROUSERS

By Pr. Beate Chun

A Small Town and a Hidden Image

Grace to you and peace
from the one who is
and the one who was
and the one who is to come.

High up in the Alps,
in northern Italy,
there is a little town called Sterzing.

It is ancient,
more than 2,000 years old,
once located along an important military road,
a place of movement and passage.

Today it is small,
about 7,000 people.
Known for Olympic skiers,
some even gold medalists.

But Sterzing is perhaps
even more remarkable for its churches.

Among them is
the parish church of *Our Lady of the Marsh*.
It is a massive church,
the largest between Verona and Munich.

Inside this church
there once stood a famous altar,
now moved to a nearby museum.

On that altar
was an image of Saint Joseph,
which you see reproduced
in your bulletin today.

I came across this image
while preparing for today's sermon,
because today's Gospel reading
gives us a glimpse
into the story of Joseph,
Joseph who served
as father to Jesus.

Mary Everywhere, Joseph in the Background

We know very little about Joseph.
In contrast,
Scripture overflows
with stories of Mary.

Mary and the angel Gabriel.
Mary's courageous yes:
"Let it be to me according to your word."

Mary visiting Elizabeth.
Mary singing the Magnificat,
a song that has traveled
through centuries and cultures.

Mary on the road to Bethlehem.
Mary at the manger.
Mary treasuring words in her heart.

Mary at Cana,
not meek and mild,
but decisive and clear.

Mary at the foot of the cross.
Mary in the early church.

So much Mary.

And Joseph?

Often silent.
Often pushed aside.
Present,
but rarely noticed.

Joseph and the Risk of Obedience

Joseph, too, has a story.

Joseph discovers
that Mary is pregnant.
He does not know how this happened.
He knows only this:
the child is not his.

And so he decides
to divorce her quietly,
to spare her public shame,
to protect her dignity.

Then an angel appears
to him in a dream and says:

*“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.”*

And with that,
Joseph sets aside
his own plans,
his own judgment,
his own carefully reasoned conclusion.

He trusts the dream.

He comes to Mary’s side.
He supports her.
He travels with her to Bethlehem.
He is present at the birth.

And then he gives the child a name.

Jesus.

Naming the child matters.
It is an act of responsibility.
It means Joseph steps into a role
that will never be simple,
never safe,
never fully explained.

A Life Shaped by Dreams

Shepherds come and go.
Kings come and go.

And Joseph dreams again.

Again an angel speaks:

*“Get up,
take the child and his mother,
and flee to Egypt,
and remain there until I tell you,*

*for Herod is going to search for the child
to destroy him.”*

And again,
Joseph obeys.

He gets up by night.
He takes the child and his mother.
He leaves behind
home,
work,
language,
security.

He becomes a refugee
in a foreign land.

And then,
he dreams again.

First the message is:
it is safe to return.

Then another word follows:
perhaps not so safe after all.
Avoid Judea.
Go north.
Settle in Galilee.
In Nazareth.

And once more,
Joseph follows the dream.

Four dreams.

Dream one:
Do not fear taking Mary as your wife.

Dream two:
Flee to Egypt.

Dream three:
Return home.

Dream four:
Avoid Judea.

Four moments
in which Joseph's life
is redirected.

Just like the first Joseph,
the dreamer among twelve brothers,
whose dreams got him into trouble
and yet became the means
by which many lives were saved.

Faith Without Spotlight

Joseph plays an important role
in the story of Jesus.

He receives dreams.
He receives instructions.
And he follows them.

I wonder
whether these instructions
always made sense to him.

I doubt it.

And yet he follows.
Again and again.

Courageous.
Steadfast.
Protective.
Decisive.

A person you could rely on.

And still,
Joseph remains nearly invisible.

He speaks no recorded words.
He fades from the story
once Jesus begins his ministry.

Not the protagonist.
Not the miracle worker.

And yet he does
what a good and caring father does.

He stays.
He protects.
He provides.

The Incarnation in a Pair of Trousers

In the Middle Ages,
people finally arrived
at a new appreciation of Joseph.

Artists imagined him
not as an old man at the edge,
but as someone fully engaged
in the work of love.

Cooking.
Fetching water.
Drying diapers.
Warming the child.

And among these images
is the one from Sterzing.

Look closely.

At first it seems
as though Joseph is drying his feet.

But look again.

He is removing his leggings.
In the fifteenth century,
men wore hose, not trousers.

Joseph is taking them off.

For the child.

From his own clothing
he makes warmth
for the naked baby.

This is incarnation theology
in wood and paint.

God does not arrive
through power or explanation.
God arrives
through cold skin,
through human vulnerability,
through the need to be warmed.

Joseph may never have understood
how Mary became pregnant
by the Holy Spirit.

Frankly,
neither do we.

But he understands this:

The child is cold.
Mary is vulnerable.
Something must be done.

He does not search for meaning.

He takes off his trousers.

Advent Faith: Waiting, Acting, Staying

This is Advent faith.

Not having all the answers.
Not understanding everything.
But waiting,
listening,
and then acting.

Faith happens there.

In the gesture.
In the body.
In the ordinary.

Joseph believes
with his hands,
with his legs,
with what he has.

His faith is made of
small services,
daily responsibility,
quiet courage.

And this kind of faith
still matters.

In homes where care is given.
In congregations that keep showing up.
In people who protect the vulnerable.
In love that acts without applause.

God does not ask us
to understand everything.

God asks us
to stay,
to care,
to warm what is cold.

To believe,
sometimes,
with our trousers.

May God give us
that kind of faith.

A faith that waits.
A faith that acts.
A faith that stays.

Amen.

**Sermon for Sunday, December 21, 2025
Advent 4 Year C**

Presented at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church San Francisco

Text: [Matthew 1:18-25 NRSVue - The Birth of Jesus the Messiah - Now - Bible Gateway](#)

Tags: December 21, 2025 | Advent 4 Year C | Matthew 1:18-25 | Joseph | Dream | Incarnation