

Sermon Note: Disappointment, Doubt, and a Dream

Second Sunday in Advent

Introduction

As we continue our Advent series based on Adam Hamilton's *The Journey*, we turn from Nazareth to a moment of personal crisis for Joseph. His world has been quietly unraveling—an engagement upended, a future he had planned suddenly uncertain, and a choice thrust upon him that carries tangible cost. This week's Gospel passage gives us a picture of someone trying to do the right thing with limited information, guided only by his character and compassion. Into this mix of disappointment and fear comes a dream that disrupts his assumptions and opens a different path. This week's message invites us into Joseph's story, where faithful courage invites us to trust in God's presence even when the path ahead is not yet clear.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JkIuRHpg734>

In this clip from *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), George dives into the river to save a stranger and finds the encounter far more surprising than he expected.

Why This Video?

The scene from this classic Christmas movie begins with chaos and confusion—splashing water, urgent calls for help, and an instinctive leap into danger. George is compelled to set aside his own troubles in this moment, as he responds to someone who appears to be in distress. What follows is an unexpected conversation that overturns his assumptions about what's happening and who this stranger is. The interaction is part rescue, part interruption, and part revelation. It shows how a single moment can shift direction, open new possibilities, and challenge the story someone has been telling themselves. This interaction invites us to consider how surprising encounters can break us free of our struggles and offer a different way forward.

Video Discussion Questions

1. George acts quickly when he hears someone in trouble. What does this moment reveal about his character, even before we learn anything else from the conversation?
2. The stranger's calm, straightforward manner contrasts with George's confusion. How does that contrast shape the way you interpret the interaction in this scene?
3. The conversation moves in an unexpected direction once George realizes this stranger knows things about him. What does that kind of surprise do to someone who already feels unsettled?
4. Clarence describes himself in terms George never expected to hear. How does that moment challenge the assumptions people often make when they feel cornered or overwhelmed?
5. George's reactions shift from disbelief to irritation to curiosity. What do these shifts suggest about what happens internally when a person encounters something they can't easily explain?

6. Clarence insists he was “sent” and has a job to do. How does that claim change the tone of their interaction, and how do you respond as a result? Do you have questions? Does this stir a memory?
7. The scene marks a turning point, even though George doesn’t see it yet. When you watch it, what signals—large or small—suggest that a new direction is opening for him?

Matthew 1:18-24 (NRSVue)

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife

Scripture Study Questions

1. Joseph’s first response is shaped by both disappointment and compassion. How does this tension help you understand his character and the weight of the decision in front of him?
2. The passage describes Joseph as “righteous,” yet his plan is neither harsh nor punitive. What does this suggest about the way Scripture understands righteousness?
3. Joseph resolves to act quietly before any divine message arrives. What does that decision reveal about the role of conscience when the path isn’t obvious?
4. The angel addresses Joseph as “son of David.” How does that title deepen the significance of what Joseph is being asked to carry forward?
5. The message Joseph receives overturns his assumptions about the situation. When have you experienced a moment when new understanding changed the direction you thought you needed to go?
6. Naming the child “Jesus” is part of Joseph’s calling. What does this act of naming communicate about Joseph’s role in this story?
7. The prophecy quoted—Emmanuel, “God is with us”—anchors the angel’s message. How does this promise impact Joseph’s moment of fear and uncertainty?
8. Joseph awakens from the dream and acts on what he heard. What helps you trust a direction when you cannot verify every detail, and what challenges that trust?

Weekly Action

Choose one situation this week where you feel pulled in two directions—uncertainty, disappointment, or a difficult decision. Take a moment to make a list of what you know, what you don’t know, and what matters

most to you about the situation. Make time to pray about every part of the list. Then take one small step shaped by compassion rather than fear. This practice echoes Joseph's steady, thoughtful posture and can help find clarity as the week unfolds.

Prayer

Holy One, you meet us in our questions and in the places where our plans fall apart. Give us Joseph's steadiness, his compassion, and his willingness to listen for your guidance. Help us move through our days with patience and courage, trusting that you are present even when we cannot see the full path ahead. Amen.

Disclosure: This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. In this case, AI assisted the author with ideation, initial drafting of section content, discussion-question development, tone adjustments, structural consistency, and formatting. All final text was written, reviewed, and approved by Rev. Rhodes.