

Sermon
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 21st, 2025
The Rev. Victoria Scott
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
Readings: ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; ROMANS 1:1-7; MATTHEW
1:18-25

I often think about Mary's yes to God. Her yes to the angel Gabriel—“*Let it be with me according to your word*”—the yes that made the Incarnation possible. God with us, in Jesus, enters the world because Mary says yes.

But this year, our lectionary gives us Joseph.

Joseph's yes is quieter. Less poetic. And maybe harder.

You've heard me mention the word “with” before, and it's worth repeating this:

Sam Wells (in his book *Incarnational Ministry*), says that “*with*” is the most important word in Scripture. He contrasts *with* and *for*, pointing out that *for* is often easier. Doing something *for* someone allows us to keep our distance. Being *with* someone asks much more of us. It requires presence. Vulnerability. Staying.

It would be easier if God came at Christmas to fix everything *for* us. To set the world right. To remove pain and confusion and fear. But God doesn't choose *for*. God chooses *with*.

And that choice changes everything.

Joseph's story begins in fear. His life has come apart overnight. The future he imagined—his marriage, his reputation, his sense of order—has dissolved. He is hurt. Confused. Likely ashamed. And afraid.

The world would have told Joseph that strength meant control. That righteousness meant following the rules. That bravery meant not letting anyone see him bend—that to be brave is the absence of fear. The world still tells us that.

We are taught—often without words—that to be soft is to be weak. That flexibility is failure. That admitting fear is shameful. That mistakes are disqualifying. We are encouraged to prove ourselves, to harden ourselves, to pretend we are not afraid.

What if being soft and flexible is far more durable than being hard and brittle?

What if admitting fear takes more courage than pretending it isn't there? What if being willing to make mistakes gets us further than never trying? The world decides that to be fallible is weak, even though we are all fallible. What if the strong ones are the ones who accept it? Joseph accepts it. He doesn't stop being afraid. But he chooses courage anyway.

Joseph plans to dismiss Mary quietly. Even shaped by the rules of his tradition, he refuses cruelty - a public dismissal could have meant death by stoning for Mary. And then God meets him—not with certainty, not with explanations, but with

presence. *Do not be afraid*, the angel says. Not because fear is wrong, but because Joseph is not alone in it.

Joseph says yes—not because he is brave, but because God is with him.

This is where Emmanuel enters the story.

“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel”—which means, God is with us.

God comes into the world not through certainty, but through vulnerability. Not through power, but through relationship. Not through fearless people, but through people who are afraid and choose courage anyway.

Bravery, as the world defines it, is often a lie. It pretends we are not afraid. It pretends we are in control. It pretends we don't need anyone else. But courage tells the truth. Courage admits fear and stays present anyway. Courage chooses relationship. Courage trusts presence more than control. And Emmanuel, God-with-us, makes that possible.

God does not come to stand at a distance. God does not wait until the mess is cleaned up or the people are ready. God comes into the confusion, the risk, the vulnerability. God comes to be with us.

Jesus is God with us—and he shows us how to be with God, with each other, and with all of creation. Yes, there is something *for* us in Jesus—healing, teaching, life, death, resurrection—but all of it is rooted in *with*. God’s refusal to abandon us.

Christmas does not erase grief or pain or fear. It infuses them with hope. Not because everything is fixed, but because we are not alone.

Joseph’s yes makes space for God to be born. And so does our yes to God..

How often do we find ourselves in situations we would never choose? Circumstances beyond our control? Moments when fear feels overwhelming and the future unclear? Advent tells us that God may be born precisely there.

When we choose courage—not the loud kind, not the performative kind, but the quiet courage of staying present—we participate in Emmanuel, in God-with-us. We choose courage and we say yes to God when we remain soft in a hard world. When we admit fear. When we risk love. When we stay.

Meister Eckhart said that God is always needing to be born, and that we are meant to be bearers of God. God is born when we say yes to being with—when we choose courage grounded in God’s presence.

In a few moments we’ll reflect together with these questions: *Where have I experienced God’s love this week? What word describes the love I believe the world most needs? What does “Emmanuel—God with us” mean to me today?*

Alongside those questions we might also ask: *Where am I being invited to choose courage? And where do I see others choosing it already?*

God did not wait for perfect conditions. God came into our fragile, fearful, complicated world to be with us. This is our hope. This is our courage. God is with us. And because God is with us, we can choose courage. Today. And every day. May it be so, in Jesus' name. Amen.