

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
21 December 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“When You’re Afraid, Give Me Your Hand”

Fourth Sermon in the Advent, Christmas, & Epiphany series,
What do you fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Isaiah 41:5-10; Matthew 1:18-25

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

I awoke this morning to a great story in my inbox from Historian of American Christianity, Diana Butler Bass:

“More than two decades ago, we had trouble selling our house in Memphis. A Catholic colleague told us about the popular belief that St. Joseph is the patron saint of real estate. On his suggestion, we bought a small statue of St. Joseph and buried it in the front garden. We’re good Protestants but we were getting desperate. *“What’s the harm?”* my husband laughed. *“We need to sell this place.”*

A few weeks later, the house sold. Not long after that, we packed up our car and headed to Virginia. Somewhere beyond Nashville, many miles from Memphis, I blurted out: *“Oh no!”*

We left St. Joseph in the yard! We forgot him!”

“I bet we’re not the first,” my husband said with an ironic tone.

We drove on, leaving Joseph behind in the dirt. As far as I know, he still lies there, neglected and unremembered.

It almost doesn’t need to be said that Christians do much the same with Joseph in the Christmas story.”¹

And it’s true, right? We extol Mary and sing her song. Mary gets all the credit for Jesus’ birth—and rightly so—but without Joseph, Jesus may never have been born. Joseph’s acceptance of Mary becomes shield of protection around her, reducing stigma. And, of course, later his work provides for the

¹ Diana Butler Bass, “Sunday Musings: Advent 4: Forgotten Joseph, *The Cottage* (Dec. 21, 2025), accessed on Dec. 21, 2025 at dianabutlerbass@substack.com.

family, giving them a home, food, a chance for survival. Mary would have been ostracized without Joseph. She may even have been killed.

Joseph shows radical, risky Love. And not in a flashy way. He's not at the front of any marches or protests. He's not the first one to raise his hand or volunteer for something. He's a background guy. Faithful. Loyal. Consistent. Quiet. Avoiding the spotlight. So if you live your faith without a lot of fanfare, Joseph is your guy. But while his faithfulness was without fanfare, it wasn't without fear.

He's a "Steady Eddie" in this text, but I imagine there was a lot more going on inside than he let on. And we really only have this one scene in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel to get an idea of Joseph's character and personality. Here, in this moment, Joseph shines, even as he remains silent. In fact, some call Joseph not the Real Estate Saint, but the *Silent Saint*. Have you ever noticed that Joseph never speaks a word, at least not any word that is recorded in scripture? We presume he did

speak of course, but for the sake of the biblical narrative, it's Joseph's *actions* he is remembered for, not his speech or a song, but his actions. And specifically THIS action: of sticking with Mary, of showing solidarity, of saying all that he needs to say about what it means to be faithful...without uttering a word

And what a painful moment we meet Joseph in. For the woman you are set to begin a life with to be pregnant with a child you had nothing to do with. Betrayal is just the beginning of a cascade of emotions, I'm sure.

And the law was on Joseph's side here. "Publicly disowning the child and disavowing the woman would be the least most men would do. Believe it or not, legally, Joseph could have had Mary stoned to death."² In a society as patriarchal as Joseph's, it would have been understood and acceptable for him to lash out at Mary for disgracing him. Yet, in his goodness, in his *righteousness*, as Matthew describes him, Joseph is silent. He does not want to expose Mary to public scandal so he seemingly

² Michael Frost, "Joseph's silent submission to Mary's God-given calling is real biblical manhood," *Premier Christianity* (20 Dec. 2022), accessed on Dec. 21, 2025

at <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/josephs-silent-submission-to-marys-god-given-calling-is-real-biblical-manhood/14578.article>.

swallows his feelings and resolves to divorce her. *Quietly*, of course (Matt. 1:19). With Joseph, everything is quiet.³

But his quietness is actually part of his righteousness. I was reminded recently in a seminar with preacher professor Tom Long, that when Matthew intentionally notes for us that Joseph was a “righteous man” that this means way more than just “he was a good guy.” Matthew writes his gospel as a Jew, for a Jewish audience. In some ways, Matthew’s gospel is the most difficult for us to understand because we miss so many of these references and notes that are second-nature to Matthew’s first-century Jewish audience.

“Righteous” is a serious, and telling, descriptor in Matthew’s vocabulary.

I have long loved the writing of Chaim Potok. His 1967 novel, *The Chosen*, is a coming-of-age story of two boys Reuven and Danny from two different traditions: Reuven from a modern orthodox tradition and Danny is the son of a renowned Hasidic Rabbi Isaac Saunders, who is a rabbinic sage, a

tzaddik. As such, Reb Saunders is deeply religious and upon noticing at an early age how brilliant his son Danny is, he decides to raise him in a very specific manner—in silence. The only time he speaks to him is when he discusses the Talmud with him. It’s very painful for Danny.

Years later the Rabbi and father explains why he raised Danny this way: he feared that Danny’s phenomenal intelligence would lead him to lack compassion for others. So he raised him in silence so that he could learn what it is to suffer, and therefore have a soul. In fact, this is how he himself was raised. Rabbi Saunders said the only time he heard *his own* father’s voice is when “[*he would wake me in the night to tell me of the suffering of his people.*] *He would wake me and tell me stories of the destruction of Jerusalem and the sufferings of the people of Israel, and I would cry,*” (pg 284).

This experience of suffering and silence and careful observation and study of the law, of reacting with more intention and slowness to the world around

³ Frost, *ibid*.

you, this is the life and worldview of a Tzadik.

In fact, *Tzadik*, in Hebrew, is from the root word *ṣadiq*, is (צדיק *ṣ-d-q*), which means “righteous or just one” or “righteousness.” A Tzadik is a title in Judaism given to people considered “righteous,” or, ones who follow the law doing what is “righteous.” It’s the descriptor that’s given to Joseph, too.

Joseph looks at the law and knows what to do (and by God he is going to do what the law says!) He’s done this his whole life. The law is how he knows how to live his life. AND. He also understands the suffering of people. So, yes, he will follow the law, and that means he will divorce Mary. But—and here’s where the compassion comes in—*he will not disgrace her*. He will dismiss her quietly. Dismissing her quietly is righteous, and still follows the law, without the public disgrace that while he might have been entitled to culturally, was not something he could bring himself to do spiritually or emotionally.

So, in this moment it seems, that as painful as it may have been for him personally, Joseph has it figured out in terms of

what to do next. He knows how to follow the law *and* be kind while doing it.

He has a plan. And we can imagine the wave of relief that comes over Joseph at this point. You know that wave. When, after agonizing about what to do in a difficult situation or which path is the best to take, you *finally* make a decision. You land on a plan and you’re ready to move forward. Just the act of deciding brings relief, even if carrying out that decision is still going to be difficult.

Joseph has his decision.
But then he has a dream.

Unlike others in the Christmas story, Joseph in his Tzadik-ness, in his righteousness, in his propensity for silence is probably kind of mystical and not that surprised by a divine messenger coming to him in a dream. Joseph is in a highly religious community and who is the most famous ‘dreamer’ ancestor in his tradition? His own namesake Joseph...Joseph with the multi-colored coat, Joseph whose brothers threw him into a pit and sold him into slavery, Joseph who would interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and ultimately save his people from famine, and his family too.

So it's not the messenger that shocks Joseph (the angel), nor the mode of the message itself (a dream); it's the message itself (to marry Mary).

The angel of the Lord says, "*Do not be afraid...Do not be afraid to disregard YOUR plan and take Mary as your wife. Dismiss the law here, not your love, your betrothed.*"

So waking up from this dream, Joseph has yet another decision before him.

Joseph is *tzadik*. He is righteous. Joseph can not take Mary as his wife unless *he steps over* or ignores the purity code—The Code By Which He Lives His Life. The code that tells him The Right Thing To Do. The Code That Gives Direction and Definition to His Life.

Yet, now, cloaked in the privacy and silence of night, God whispers a different spiritual direction to Joseph in a dream. And when he awakes, he's back to his Pros and Cons list-making, if you will. His *This Way* or *That Way* deliberations.

Don't you hate that? When you finally make a decision and have a path forward, and then

someone or something throws a wrench in it and says, "Wait, have you considered *This*?" And whatever the **THIS** is, no you hadn't considered it, and now yes, it changes everything?! Sigh. So it is with Joseph. And we can imagine his deliberations.

On the one hand, The Purity Code says he must divorce Mary.

On the other hand, The Divine Messenger says he needs to stay with Mary, have this son with her, and give him a name, and raise him.

Back and forth, back and forth, we can imagine Joseph tossing and turning with this quandary: follow the Purity Code or follow the Divine Messenger? The Purity Code is written down and known and acknowledged by everyone in his community. The Divine Messenger came in the privacy and anonymity of night; no one else saw or heard or experienced what he did. Who would believe that?

When Joseph wakes up from his dream, he has to decide, "Is he going to be Right?— OR — is he going to be *Righteous*?"

On the surface, they might seem similar, but they are worlds apart. Being “right” often means proving your point or making sure others know you’re correct because you’re following the rules. But being “righteous” is about living in alignment with what is just, fair, and morally good—things that benefit not just you, but everyone around you. Biblical righteousness is always in a context of being faithful to community and relationships. Think of it this way: “Rightness” is rooted in Rules, “Righteousness” is rooted in relationship.

Is Joseph going “to be right” according to the law and his religion – OR – is he going to honor this relationship and “do right by God” and the person in front of him, in this case, Mary?”

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love, we proclaim that God is *Love*. If that is true, then “doing right by God” is the same thing as “doing Right by Love.”

Just as Jesus healed on the Sabbath, breaking the rules of the Right Way of Doing Things, in order to show love and compassion to The Person Right in Front of Him, Joseph is

confronted with this same choice. *Be right* by the law or *DO right* by Love?

We are always interpreting the law anew in our day. Examining the laws that are written down, and laws that are spoken and unspoken in our culture, church, and world, side by side with the laws of love that live in our hearts, the laws of Love, that Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, will come to embody in our world. And the Laws of Love do not protect profits or power or position or privilege; the Laws of Love protect and prioritize people.

Theologian and ethicist and committed *pacifist*, Stanley Hauerwas loves to tell this story from his own life that gets at the heart of the difference between “being right” about an issue versus “doing right” by the person in front of you.

Hauerwas was raised in Texas by a father who was a bricklayer, who apprenticed him to be a bricklayer. So when Hauerwas goes away to Yale Divinity School, it’s not just a world away geographically for his father, it’s a world away professionally and politically and religiously too. As he progressed in his studies, he and

his father had less and less they connected on. Their phone calls became shorter in duration, and further apart in frequency.

Hauerwas said:

“One winter, when the weather made it especially hard for bricklayers work, my Uncle George, who was always into something, decided to make a rifle. And he got my father involved in making a rifle too. My father cut down the tree, laid the stock, set the sight, 30-06 (thirty ought six). It was a deer rifle. And when I would talk with my parents on the phone when I was in New Haven, all Daddy wanted to talk about was making this gun, because that's what he had to do during the winter. It was his life. I listened politely.

Well, that summer, my wife and I made our usual trip home and we had hardly entered the door when my father thrust the now completed gun into my hands. It was indeed a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. He carved the stock out of a hickory tree he had cut down himself. My first words were “Thank you” but I was not content to stop there. Flush with theories about the

importance of truthfulness and the irrationality of our society's gun policy, I said, ‘Oh, this is a beautiful gun, Daddy, but you understand, someday we're going to have to take these {bleep-ing} things away from you people.’⁴

Hauerwas later would say about this exchange: *“I may have been right about the moral issue, but it was one of the lowest moral moments in my whole life. I could see the gun but I couldn't see my father.”* I could not see his love and that he was simply trying to connect with me in some way. And the very thing I hate about gun violence, that it kills and disrupts human connection—is the very thing I was doing too—putting “being right” about an issue above “doing right” by the person in front of me.

When we make issues more important than people, we lose our way. Not that issues aren't important. Or that policies aren't important. Quite the opposite. Hauerwas remains an outspoken pacifist, and he says, “I can argue against guns all day, but this wasn't a moment for arguing, it was a moment of

⁴ Lee C. Camp, “Stanley Hauerwas: ‘America's Best Theologian,’” (11 July 2024), *No Small Endeavor Podcast*, accessed on Dec. 21, 2025 at

<https://www.nosmallendeavor.com/stanley-hauerwas-best-theologian-in-america>.

gift-giving and I didn't receive the gift. It was not a moment to argue. It was a moment to see my father, not the gun. A moment to respond in love, and save the lecture for later.

Our lives are full of moments like this too. When we are faced with the question: are we gonna BE right or DO right? And in this moment with Mary, this is THE question for Joseph, and in many ways it's more relatable than Mary's question or predicament. We might have a moment or two in our life where we face a big calling by God and have to say YES or NO like Mary, but those are not nearly as frequent as the Joseph moments.

We have Mary moments, yes. But what is more common throughout our lives, is that we are in the position of Joseph. Someone near to us, close to us, adjacent to us, in our community, or someone we hear about or know about, something happens to THEM. Something that rocks their world. A diagnosis that changes everything. An arrest that changes everything. An accident that changes everything. A decision that changes everything. A coming out story that changes everything. A

betrayal that changes everything. A stupid, split-second decision that changes everything. And we ourselves are not the person it happens to, but we are in proximity to that person in some way: we are their child, their partner, their parent, their friend, their colleague, or maybe just a fellow member of society. And in that moment, like Joseph, we have to decide: do we distance ourselves and dismiss that person, situation, or circumstance quietly—protecting our own personal peace and energy and reputation and image, saying *“that's just too much for me to do deal with or handle right now...I love you but I can't journey with you...”*—OR—do we decide to extend our hand to that person and say, *“I'm here with you. I have no idea what this journey is or how to walk it with you, but I'm here and let's do it together...one foot in front of the other.”*

Sometimes it's not even about “being right” or “doing right.” Sometimes it's just about risking our privilege and place, our sacrificing some of our time and energy, or putting our reputation on the line for the sake of someone who needs us.

The Joseph moments in our lives come when we are the partner sitting next to the one we love as a doctor tells them a devastating diagnosis. And we know...this is a *lean in* or *lean out* moment. And while everything in us may want to lean out, most of us choose to lean in. But not always. There are people in this room who have been betrayed in times of illness or need by ones they thought loved them. That pain is deep and real.

The Joseph moments in our lives come when we are the child who starts noticing our parent's health is changing and declining, and we have to decide, do I talk to them about it, or do I just pretend I don't see or let my other siblings handle it? Do I lean into an active role in my parents' care, or do I lean out, terrified about what it will mean for my life if I'm now a caregiver when I have my own kids I'm still caring for too.

The Joseph moments in our lives come when we get "that call" as parents about something our kid has done that is not great...like really not great...something serious with consequences that has hurt a lot of people, including us. And we

have to decide—what does it look like to journey with them through this? What does an extended hand of compassion look like when boundaries need to be set? When trust has been broken? When hope is threadbare?

The Joseph moments in our lives come when we are talking to someone in our community who needs a ride somewhere and we have to decide, does it matter that I don't know this person that well and that I don't really have time in my day to do this, or do I hear their need to get from Point A to Point B as a need I'm called to meet? Do I lean in or lean out? Do I follow the protocols of 'safety' and 'don't talk to strangers' that I've been taught, or do I listen to that divine messenger voice that says, *'I am the stranger, when you help them, you help me...'*

The Joseph moments in our lives come when we hear something on the news that we cannot unhear or when we learn something in a classroom or a conversation that we cannot unlearn and we have to decide, well what now? What do I do with this information? It is never convenient to learn of systemic injustices or ways that racism or antisemitism or

xenophobia or homophobia are at play in our world—but when a layer of injustice is revealed to us, we have to decide, do I now extend my hands to help change things and journey with people who are affected by this, or do I wipe my hands clean, saying, *“well, I didn’t cause this injustice, so therefore it’s not my job to fix it.”*

You see the Joseph moments come with those closest to us in our families and with those in proximity to us in community, but they always come with a powerful invitation...do we say YES to journeying with people through the unpleasant, unbecoming, hard stuff of life? The stuff that might ostracize them from others, and that in turn, might ostracize us as well? The stuff that might push us out of our comfort zones and challenge our us beyond the limits of the law?

Fear can keep us locked in clear cut, Right or Wrong thinking. Fear can prohibit us from living in *righteousness*, that is, in rightness of heart, looking to Love for our next move, rather than a prescribed Rule or Law. There is nothing wrong with

laws or rules, they are needed and helpful; but they are not guidelines for how to live through our fear with love.

As Rev. Mark Feldmeir says, “While Mary gets most of our attention for giving her brave “yes” to God’s radical proposal to bear the Messiah, it is Joseph who must agree to become an accomplice to the divine plan....

Like Joseph, sometimes we arrive at a crossroads in life where we must choose between doing the right thing and doing the expedient thing. Most often, the right thing is the harder thing. But it’s usually the hard things we do that birth new possibilities in our lives and in the world.”⁵

“Joseph’s response is an act of courageous solidarity. Joseph could have stepped back. But instead, he steps in. He does not fix everything. He does not erase the risk. But he chooses to share it.”⁶

“He says, in effect: *“You don’t have to go through this alone. Give me your hand.”* This is not the language of saviorism but of accompaniment. It’s what we might call a theology of

⁵ Rev. Mark Feldmeir, “Weekly Vlog,” St. Andrew United Methodist Church (17 Dec. 2025).

⁶ Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, “Commentary on Matthew 11:18-25; Isaiah 43:5-10,” *Sanctified Art What do you*

fear? Sermon Planning Guide for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, ‘When You’re Afraid, Give Me Your Hand,’ (c. 2025), pg 17-18 accessed on Dec. 21. 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

proximity—where faithfulness means drawing near to the vulnerable and aligning ourselves with those at risk, even when we are afraid ourselves.”⁷ Even when it breaks or bends the rules, all for the sake of Love.

Scholar Boyung Lee says: “The Gospel opens with a quiet act of resistance: Joseph lays aside patriarchal expectation and legalistic judgment, choosing instead to protect Mary and the unborn child. In doing so, he becomes a quiet but vital part of God’s liberating plan...Joseph becomes not only a guardian of Mary’s dignity, but a protector of Jesus’ life...Mary has already said yes to God. But that yes didn’t make her fearless. She still needs a companion. She still needs someone to walk beside her. And Joseph, moved by divine whisper, reaches through his own fear to offer his presence. This story is not just about them. It is also about us. There are people in our communities today who, like Mary, carry something sacred and heavy—something that puts them at risk. Perhaps it’s their identity, their truth, their calling, or their hope.”⁸

“And there are others, like Joseph, who hold more security, more safety, more voice. Advent invites us not simply to “be not afraid,” but to act with love in the midst of fear. [To do right.] Not to fix everything, but to show up with courage. To reach out and say: “*Give me your hand.*”⁹

And when *we* are afraid, God does not just give us a hand. In fact, into the fear of Joseph and Mary’s life and into the fear of our hearts—God extends God’s very self, coming as Jesus, Emmanuel, *God with us*.

We are not alone in our fear. God is in this with us. We need one another, saying YES, leaning in, extending helping hands, taking risks, *doing* right more than *being* right.

Imagine if Joseph had quietly dismissed Mary as planned. Would the child in Mary’s womb have survived? Would Mary have survived the public humiliation without Joseph’s support? Would she have been provided for? Would she have had a place to live?

⁷ Lee, *ibid.*

⁸ Lee, *ibid.*

⁹ Lee, *ibid.*

The incarnation of God in Jesus,
could not happen with just one
person's YES; God's people had
to say YES too—people like
Joseph who know that Loving
God means Leaning In and
choosing Love, even when it
defies law or logic.

Pay special attention to the
Joseph's moments in your life.
The moments you have to make
a difference for someone
else...to show up for them in a
way that they need. Will you
lean, or lean out?

Quietly and faithfully, Joseph's
actions speak volumes to us, if
we have ears to hear.

Amen.