

Joseph (*midrash for Advent worship 12.8.2016*)
based on Matthew 1:18-25

I have never been a man of many words, so bear with me.

It all happened so fast that it's hard to remember how it unfolded.
Our parents had arranged for us to marry.

I barely knew her.
She seemed shy, young for sure, but pleasant,
bright with a kind of sure-footedness and quiet confidence.
We had only met a few times
But I liked her and I could see us spending the rest of our lives
Raising children, growing old together.

I am a carpenter, which means I like to measure twice, and cut once.
I like to be sure.
Like a lot of our type, I am practical by nature, but I also can imagine how things will turn out. Make a plan and follow it through.

When I go into a building ~ a house or a stable ~
I notice how things are put together.
I notice the joists and the joinings in the cross beams.
I notice how well it will hold up in a storm.
I can picture if it will still be here 15 years from now.

And I like to know that things will work well.
I like to know that a table will hold up to all the spills,
all the meals, all the times you need to lean on it.
I like to know that a chair will hold a small child or a heavy adult.

I believe in good shelter and good form. I want people to be well taken care of.

My mother used to say that we carpenters have rough hands but warm hearts.
Maybe it's true. I believe it's important to be kind, to be loyal.

So it was a shock when I heard she was pregnant.
Could this be true?
It seemed like a violation.

I knew what people would have said to me.
You can say NO.
You can say this is much more than I bargained for.
I could say, "Mary, how could you do this to me? I trusted you!"
I could say to Mary's parents, your daughter is a disgrace and I have been betrayed.
I could have gone by the law, which calls for death in these matters.

But that's not how I would do it.
It may be what the law says, but not what I would do.
Just a quiet good-bye.
We'd cancel the agreement. I'd go on my way.

And then I had that dream.
Strange. The Lord coming to me in a bright light, with a quiet, reassuring voice,
 much like my uncle the shepherd,
 who used to sing the sheep to sleep.

And when I awoke from that dream, it was all clear.
We keep our plans. They would just work out differently.
God had something else in mind.

It was strange watching Mary's belly grow,
 knowing that I would be the foster father,
Even stranger learning that this was the child of God, of the Holy Spirit.

I can't even really understand it now.

But I do know what a strange and wonderful child he is.
Very curious, kind, gentle, and yet very clear.
His mother says he has an old soul, and that's very true.
He often surprises me with ancient wisdom,
 with words from the scriptures.

He's not very good with his hands,
 even kind of clumsy in the workshop,
 so I know he's not my son!
But he is a patient learner and he makes me proud.

There have been many more dreams since that night a few years back.
And I am glad I listened,
 because this boy has made all the difference in my life.