

December 22, 2019 (Fourth Sunday of Advent) | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 1:18–25](#)

TITLE: Heirs Apparent

By the Rev Dr. Randy Bush

How many of you know someone who's been adopted? Adoption is a wonderful thing. It reflects an expansive, generous definition of love, home and family. My mother was adopted. And when she and my father met in the 1950s, she told him that even if they had a bunch of kids on their own, she wanted them to adopt at least one child as a way to honor her own adoption years before. And they honored that promise. Adoption today is broadly defined. It includes not only adopting infants or foster children. It includes adopting pets from shelters or elderly neighbors who become surrogate grandparents. Adoption is a wonderful thing and a wonderfully appropriate topic for this fourth Sunday of Advent, whose theme is love.

Adoption is also an appropriate topic today because of our gospel reading from Matthew. It's a Christmas passage—Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus. Now Luke's Christmas story focuses mostly on Mary, the young girl to whom an angel appears and tells her she will give birth to God's Son. Matthew's Christmas story focuses mostly on Joseph for a different, yet important reason. Matthew chapter 1 opens with a long genealogy—one that is almost never read in church because no one wants to tackle so many obscure names in public. It starts out easy: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah, and so on. But later you run into names like Rehoboam, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Jechoniah, and Zerubbabel. Only at the very end does it list Joseph—“the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.”

Of all the ways Matthew could have started his gospel, why did he begin with a long genealogy? Partly because it had been prophesied in the Old Testament that the Messiah, the chosen child of God, would be born of the house and lineage of King David. Joseph was related to King David. Therefore Joseph needed to take Mary as his wife and accept, name, and adopt her child as his own in order for the ancient prophecy to come true. So adoption is a wonderful Christmas theme as well!

Thinking about Joseph and Mary, it is important not to let brief moments of the miraculous distract us from the humble and mundane reality of the rest of their lives. Nine months prior to Christmas an angel appeared to Mary and an announcement was made to her about the nature of the child she would carry. That moment was miraculous, but afterwards things were far less glamorous. She was just another young pregnant girl—unsure how her family and fiancé would accept her pregnancy; a girl who would have to travel late in her third trimester to a crowded village and end up giving birth away from the midwives and wise women of her own family. And Joseph's life was also pretty ordinary, a carpenter by trade, preparing for a marriage when one night something miraculous happened. He had an angel visitation in a dream that quieted some persistent doubts he was harboring. But after that, life went on as before. He told folks to quit gossiping and that he would take Mary as his wife. He married, took her into

his home, traveled with her to Bethlehem, and did what he could when the time came for the child to be born. There is more mundane than miraculous in the details of the Christmas story.

But that is exactly how it should be if we are to see ourselves as participants in this Christmas drama. Joseph and Mary are not figures elevated far above us in terms of piety and having found favor with God. No, they were poor, marginalized members of a community, a couple routinely overlooked by people of power and influence. They were the very definition of humble. There's the lovely hymn by a Latino composer with the title "Tú has Venido a la Orilla/ Lord, You have Come to the Lakeshore." The hymn asks us to imagine what it is like to be called by Jesus. The first verse says this: "*Lord, you have come to the lakeshore, looking neither for wise nor for wealthy. You only want that I should follow you. O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me, and while smiling, have called out my name. Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me. With you, I will seek other seas.*" Out of ordinary lives, out of the humble and mundane lives of Joseph and Mary, you and me, God makes something miraculous.

Consider the virtue of humility. Henri Nouwen tells the old story about a university professor who came to a Zen master to ask about Buddhism. The master served him tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched it overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. "It is over-full. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," the Master said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"¹ Humility is emptying our cup, creating the space in our lives so that God's Holy Spirit can fill it and God's love can be incarnated through us. That was true of the young girl Mary and the confused carpenter Joseph; it is true of each of us.

We quiet ourselves down and empty our overfull cups. We silence the demons of insecurity that pester us and whisper lies in our ears. We push away the host of imaginary critics that would convince us we are not special or talented or rich or attractive enough to be of true value in the world. We refuse to let the world's mistaken racial, national, and gender prejudices define who we are any longer. But what comes next? I asked Patrice to read a passage from Galatians 4 for our first scripture lesson. The middle verse in that passage ties into our Christmas theme. It says this: *When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.* There's that word again: adoption—and it's tied to a heavenly plan. In the fullness of time, God sent Christ, born of a woman, to redeem us—rescue and call us, so that we might receive adoption as children.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "The ultimate test of a society's morality is how it treats its children."² That's worth remembering—and worth asking ourselves: How do we treat children in this country? Given how many live in poverty, how many are abused, lacking access to preventive health care and excellent learning institutions, I'd say we have some work to do in this area.

Anyway, the Galatians passage is an important one: Christ came that we might receive adoption as children—or as it says in verses 6 & 7, so we might receive from God the very Spirit of Christ into our hearts, prompting us to cry to the Lord, “Abba! Father! Mother! Heavenly Parent!” We are adopted so that we are no longer slaves—possessions easily discarded. God in Christ has acted so that we might be children of God, heirs apparent of God’s kingdom.

If you’re not a big fan of British royalty and rules of primogeniture, let me explain about heirs. Heirs apparent are children who are next in line to receive all honor, titles, and glory from their parents upon their passing away. That is different from an heir presumptive, who is first in line to inherit a title but who can be displaced by the birth of a more eligible heir. God’s plan was to set in motion for us, through Christ, to be adopted as children of God and thus become heirs apparent of God’s kingdom, glory, justice and loving-kindness.

This is not just fancy sounding religious language. There’s a vital message in these passages from Galatians and Matthew all linked to this theme of heavenly adoption. Basically it is this: There are times when you may wish to be alone. There are times when you are quite happy not fighting crowds in stores, not sitting in slow-moving traffic, or not bracing for another argument about politics or what lies ahead of us in the coming year. I get that. But in the end we are spiritual, social creatures. We need to be connected one to another. We like having someone we can call. We like sharing intimacy with a person we love. We like laughing with friends, nudging someone beside us at a movie, sharing a meal with someone at home or in a restaurant, knowing there is someone who will stop by our hospital bed if we’re ill; knowing there is someone who will hold our hand or wipe our forehead or say a prayer for us at the end of our life.

The things that would destroy us are almost always things that move us away from others: Addictions in which people go to secret rooms to feed habits of drugs or binge drinking; moments of self-harm done behind locked bathroom doors; financial crimes, pornography addictions, martial infidelity that happen in the shadows away from those we love. But to be adopted as a child—to be welcomed, forgiven, accepted, loved by someone else—that is a movement toward a place in which we can truly flourish. God has adopted us by grace. That’s a given, a guarantee for all of us. We are now heirs apparent. We are not alone—now or ever.

The last Advent candle is the candle of love. How appropriate. With humility, may you empty yourself so God’s grace can abide with you. With trust, may your spirits be lifted knowing that God’s plan of healing mercy includes you, adopted child that you are. And with love, may you live and share this good news with others. For that who we are and what we are called to do, as forgiven, welcomed, heirs of the living God.

AMEN

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude*, p. 42.

² Daniel Hill, *White Awake*, p. 163.