



Sunday Sermon
December 14, 2025
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Advent IV

Matthew 1: 18-25

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

The foundation of computer programming is binary coding, 0's and 1's that function as on/off switches. We would hope that we humans are different. But truth be told, we have gotten ourselves into quite a mess on planet Earth by acting a lot like computers: I am right; you are wrong. If you are not for us, you are against us. If you break the law, you pay the price. If you are poor, you must have done something wrong. If you are an addict, it's your fault. If you are Muslim, you must support terrorists. If you are Jewish, you hate Palestinians. If you are Palestinian, you must hate Jews. Either this or that. Black or white. Right or Wrong. You must choose sides. Things are a mess; they are to blame—0/1, 0/1, 0/1.

Contemplative monk, Richard Rohr names this way of viewing the world as dualism. He writes,

The dualistic mind is essentially binary, either/or thinking. It knows by comparison, opposition, and differentiation. It uses descriptive words like good/evil, pretty/ugly, smart/stupid, not realizing there may be a hundred degrees between the two ends of each spectrum. (1)

Sounds about right. Now, dualistic thinking wasn't invented with the computer. It is as old as Cain and Abel. We know the destructive and deadly impact of such a mindset. If the Christian is good and the Muslim is bad, Crusades. If the Jew is the source of our problems and the Aryan is ideal, concentration camps. If the black man is the criminal, prisons. And if the Indigenous peoples are savage and the colonists cultured and Christian, genocide.

There are always, and to this day, leaders who take advantage of our dualistic predisposition to divide us so that they can have control, power and wealth. A few come

to mind. But why do so many enable and empower this evil? Why is it that we accept the world divided into the good and the bad, the black and the white, us and them?

To be sure, the world seems simpler when we divide it as either/or. At a deeper level, we accept and participate in this dividing of the human family, because we are afraid. We are afraid of the unknown. And we are afraid of being on the outside, of not belonging, of being forsaken.

The world of Joseph of Nazareth was not too different from ours. Again, dualism is not new. There is the law. You either follow the law and are righteous or you don't and you are unrighteous. The righteous were in; the unrighteous were not. And in this either/or world few Joseph is in a horrible predicament. He is betrothed to Mary. We often think of betrothal in the modern sense of synonymous with engagement. But in the ancient Judia, when a woman is betrothed to a man, the marriage is already a reality but not yet consummated. Under the law, it is clear what Mary, being found "with child," means.

My preaching professor in seminary always said that we must preach the bad news before preaching the good news. The bad news is that we still live in a very divided world. We accept this divided world because we are so afraid of what we do not understand. We are so worried and anxious about being cast out as other that we make sure others are labeled as the other. They may be cast aside. But now we feel safer as insiders, righteous, the ones on top.

Fear causes us to do terrible things, as we assuage our insecurity by scapegoating. Our neighbors, usually the more vulnerable, pay the price. The fearful Joseph has decided to let a vulnerable woman and an unborn child pay the price to resolve his fearful dilemma...his seeming choice between righteousness and unrighteousness. Joseph in his fear is resolved: Joseph must "dismiss her quietly," and end the betrothal - the marriage. Do not let the words "dismiss her quietly" sound benign. The consequences to her and her unborn child will inevitably be catastrophic but that is the way of the world. She is damaged goods, but Joseph is righteous

But then, in slumber, Joseph sleeps and dreams. In that liminal place where conscious and unconscious mix with conscience and angels can be heard, Joseph sees possibilities beyond the crude, simplistic either/or choices of the world, something beyond his own fears. The angel begins by offering Joseph the most repeated salvific oracle in Scripture, "do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall name him..." A few dreamy angelic words map a new world of love in Joseph's heart. He awakens to the vulnerable, beautiful, complex reality of God's love. And love risks. The old world of either/or does not compute. There is more than 0 or 1, either/or. There

is a mysterious world of complexity, beauty, angels, the Holy Spirit, miracles, forgiveness. And Joseph is changed.

In a society that literally divides the world into black and white out of fear, Martin Luther King, Jr. offered a similar dream of complex love to change us. In his last speech the night before his assassination, he offered a vision of that dream as remembered his travels to Israel and his own descent along the Jericho Road. Reflecting on the story of the Good Samaritan on that same road, he suggested to his audience that the priest and the Levite were motivated by fear and thus did not cross the road to help the injured traveler. They placed themselves on one side of the equation, on side of the road, and the victim on the other. Those holy men asked, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” That is fear casting out love. King suggested that the Samaritan reversed the question and asked the right question, the Jesus question, “If I don’t stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”

Awakening from his dream, Joseph turned away from fear and asked, “If I don’t take Mary what will happen to her...what will happen to the child...what will happen to the world.” And he “took her as his wife.” She bore a son and he named him Jesus.

Beloved, as the advent darkness, albeit broken by flickering candles, gives way to Christmas birth and light, God invites us to be changed. It is a matter of looking and seeing everyone as holy, everyone as our concern, our care.

Anyone we meet can be Mary or Jesus. Everyone is holy. As C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.” We rightly name Mary as blessed and this family as holy. But every dear one we encounter is likewise holy and blessed—no exceptions! We do not have to be like computers. We do not need to be afraid. Love casts out all fear. We too can see Mary, Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit...and a world being made new. And there we see the holy in our fellow traveller, whom we call neighbor. We are overcome with God’s greatest gift—LOVE. God so loved the world. Can we do anything else? Let us awaken from our dream. Listen! Do not be afraid. Do you hear the cries, even the tender cries, of a newborn child? Do you hear the music of God’s boundless love?

(1) <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-dualistic-mind-2017-01-29/>

(2) C.S. Lewis, *The Great Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001)