

Sunday's Sermon

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

250 Fox Hill Road ■ Hampton, Virginia 23669

December 21, 2025

The Reverend David E. Fox

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C) 2025

Matthew 1.18-25

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Picture a scene from the Old West, sometime in the 1870's. Weary cowboys in dusty Levi's gather around a blazing campfire after a day on the open range. The lonely howl of a coyote counterpoints the notes of a guitar as the moon floats serenely overhead. Suddenly, a bellow of pain shatters the night, as a cowpoke leaps away from the fire, dancing in agony. Hot-Rivet Syndrome has claimed another victim.

In those days, Levi's were made with copper rivets at stress points to provide extra strength. On these original Levi's—model 501—the crotch rivet was the critical one. When cowboys crouched too long beside the campfire, the rivet grew uncomfortably hot. For years the brave men of the West suffered this curious occupational hazard.

Talk about something worse than sand in your shorts! How could a company like Levi Strauss survive for so many years with such a problem? How was a company to survive without change? If it weren't for change, where would the world be?

Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. She was carrying this Holy Spirit-conceived baby, and she was engaged to marry Joseph. Talk about scandalous!

The Scripture tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. And being a righteous man, Joseph did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. Such disgrace would have left Mary in one of three states: living in poverty as an outcast, being shunned by society, or dead—because she could have been stoned to death.

Joseph didn't want to do that to Mary; he loved her. As one commentary notes, "Jewish, Greek, and Roman law all demanded that a man divorce his wife if she were guilty of adultery. Mediterranean society viewed with contempt the weakness of a man who let his love for his wife outweigh his appropriate honor." So, Joseph planned to dismiss her quietly. He planned to call the engagement contract null and void.

Talk about a rough beginning to a relationship! How could a "righteous" man like Joseph ever continue to love and later marry Mary? How was their relationship to survive? How was the world to survive with Joseph's decision to write Mary off? If it weren't for change, where would the world be?

Where would we be if it were not for change? Some of us appreciate things not changing. Fritos Corn Chips has done everything in its power since 1932 to keep the chip tasting exactly the same for 93 years. We resist change with the best of them. We have our morning routines, and by golly, they better never change. We order the same meals at our favorite restaurants every time.

But these are small examples of resisting change. Consider bigger resistance: "Communion every week? Are you kidding me? We've never done it that way before. It loses its meaning when we take it so often." It's been less than seventeen years since Gloria Dei made that move to weekly communion. Now many of you would feel robbed if you came and didn't have communion.

Some people stay in abusive relationships, staying until one day it's too late. "We could never leave," they protest. "We could never change our situation."

Not long ago, blacks and whites in the same school, drinking from the same water fountain, using the same restaurant was never even considered. But thanks be to God, we overcame such oppressive attitudes toward non-whites.

How are we to survive without change? If it weren't for change, where would the world be?

In 1933, Walter Haas, Sr., president of Levi Strauss, went camping in his Levi 501's. He was crouched by a crackling campfire in the High Sierras when he fell prey to Hot-Rivet Syndrome. He consulted with professional wranglers in his party. Had they suffered the same mishap? An impassioned YES was the reply. Haas vowed that the offending rivet must go, and at their next meeting the board of directors voted it into extinction.

If it weren't for change, where would the world be?

Joseph had already made up his mind before going to bed that night. He was going to quietly dismiss Mary. But then a miracle happened—a miracle at least as miraculous as the virginal conception itself. Joseph's mind was changed.

His mind was changed after an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, for the baby in her womb was from the Holy Spirit. The angel told Joseph that he was to name the baby Jesus.

The importance of Joseph naming the baby cannot be overstated. Legally, by doing this, he adopted and claimed the child as his own. This child Jesus, whom Joseph was to adopt, was coming into the world to save people from their sins. This baby Jesus is the Word made flesh, God with us, Emmanuel.

When Joseph woke from sleep, he laid aside his self-righteous ways and did as the angel commanded. He married Mary, and when the Christ child was born, he named him Jesus. Just as Isaiah prophesied: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14)

If it weren't for change, where would the world be?

Christ has brought, and continues to bring, change to this world. This change begins at the baptismal font, where Christ adopts, claims, and names us—just as Joseph did for Jesus, but with an even greater and fuller love than any earthly father could provide.

Christ is bringing about change in each of us so that we lift up the lowly, the downtrodden, the poor, and the sick—fulfilling Mary's Magnificat: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." (Luke 1:52)

Christ is bringing about change to stop us from being stuck in our ways as a church and to start being the church—telling the world the great news of Jesus' resurrection and love. As Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Christ is bringing about change in all of us to love unconditionally as he loves us. Christ is bringing about change to set us free from the bondage of sin and the world, just as he promised: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36)

The real event of Christmas is that God comes to change the world and each of us—not just through a historical virginal conception and a baby lying in a manger, but through the God who is with us today, shattering our self-righteous attitudes and moving us beyond our fears.

If it weren't for change, where would the world be? More importantly, where would you be without the change that Christ brings?

Joseph could have stayed stuck in his righteousness, dismissing Mary and missing God's greatest gift. Levi Strauss could have ignored the problem and lost their business. We could resist the changes Christ calls us to make and miss the abundant life he offers.

But God calls us to be agents of his transforming love. Be the change that Christ has empowered you to be. Step out of your comfort zones. Love the unlovable. Forgive the unforgivable. Welcome the unwelcome.

For in Christ, all things are made new—including you. Thanks be to God for the gift of change, the gift of transformation, and the gift of new life in Jesus Christ our Lord.