

December 21, Advent 4A (Matthew 1:18-25)

Birth takes a village. Our Christmas pageants recognize this truth.

by [Liddy Barlow](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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At its best, childbirth is a team sport.

While the person giving birth has the hardest and most important role, an entire pit crew ideally stands at the ready to assist: a midwife or obstetrician, nurses or assistants, specialists on call in case of emergency, family members cheering over the phone, a faith community sending prayers, someone to deliver pizza when it's all over.

And most important of all, a birth partner.

In Penny Simkin's 1989 book *The Birth Partner*, still going strong in its recent sixth edition, the birth partner is the primary support person during childbirth. It's often a spouse or partner; sometimes it's a friend or a parent or a professional doula. The birth partner's work takes many forms: advocacy, cheerleading, timing contractions, offering ice chips, sneaking granola bars, rubbing their partner's aching back for hours on end. If the birth partner does their work well, their presence seems essential. The new baby is a product of their effort, even though the child didn't emerge from their womb.

Birth takes a village. Our Christmas pageants recognize this truth: blue-costumed Mary sits at the center of a crowded stage full of shepherds and sheep, wise ones and camels, cows and donkeys, and (at least in *Love Actually*) more than one lobster. Matthew's Gospel stars a big cast, too. "The birth of the Lord Jesus Christ took place in this way," Matthew says, and then immediately we cut to a scene starring a local bachelor and an angel—neither of them a creature typically associated with birth.

Mary's disappearance from the narrative can at first seem disappointingly patriarchal. Alas, even a birth story privileges a man's point of view. Joseph's first response upon learning of her pregnancy only exacerbates matters; it sounds as if the most righteous thing he can do is quietly dismiss her to the hardship of single parenthood. That's fine, I guess, but not exactly heroic. Joseph doesn't deserve moral kudos just for declining to stone his fiancée to death.

But something richer is happening here, something much more exciting than first-century gender roles would usually allow. At the angel's urging, Joseph agrees to stand with Mary and to take an active role in welcoming her child. She is not left to make her way through this story all by herself. Joseph will be beside her, playing his own part in bringing the Messiah into the world. He agrees to become Mary's birth partner.

The birth itself takes place offstage in this gospel; we don't know if Joseph modeled breathing exercises or helped Mary keep her balance in a squat. But we do know that he took Mary as his wife, formalizing their relationship into a lasting marriage. We do see him offering the child a name, one that carries rich prophetic meaning.

We see him, also, offering his lineage. Though Joseph's DNA does not shape Jesus' genetics, he nevertheless becomes part of the Messiah's family tree. When Matthew traces Jesus' ancestors, he does so not through

Mary's line but through Joseph's, connecting the child into the house of David and the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Joseph, not the birth giver but the birth partner, is the point of ancestral connection that helps Jesus fulfill ancient prophecy about David's line.

Matthew's purpose in telling the story this way seems directed straight at gentiles, and at all of us adopted into the family of God. Like the Christ Child, we share a much broader lineage than appears at first glance. Abraham and Sarah can be our ancestors. Our forefathers and mothers are not limited only to those who physically gave birth to us: we are descended, also, from a great crowd of doulas and friends, midwives and cheerleaders, who made our stories possible. The whole of God's family is our family too.

What's more, Matthew's telling of Joseph's story empowers us all to take our place on that crowded pageant stage. It may not be our calling to feel the contractions, to hear an angel message, or to travel to Bethlehem, but it takes many, many people to give birth to the Divine. In each of our vocations and locations, across our many geographies and cultures, we can offer our own hearts and efforts to support this holy work. Our small deeds help; our supporting roles are needed. Those of us who just pass the ice chips or murmur encouraging words: we are bringing the kingdom to birth. We are partners in God's labor. The Savior is of our own lineage. Unto us—all of us—a child is born.