

ADVENT FOUR, YEAR A, DECEMBER 18, 2022

A few days before Christmas a woman had a dream that her husband gave her a pearl necklace for Christmas. In the morning she told her husband about the dream and asked him what he thought her dream meant. He replied she would find out on Christmas. Each night she had the same dream and asked her husband each morning what he thought it meant and he gave her the same response, "you'll find out on Christmas". On Christmas day her husband handed her a small package and she excitedly opened it only to find, not a pearl necklace, but a book titled, "The meaning of dreams.

Most of us usually have two types of dreams. We all have dreams that are dreadful where you are either being chased or falling or living out missing important meetings and deadlines. But there are other dreams that are refreshing where you dream of success or hope and wonderful possibilities.

Today's gospel lesson is about a dream. It's the dream of Joseph. Not Mary's dream, but Joseph's dream. In fact, the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary appears in only one gospel, the gospel of Luke. In Matthew's gospel, the angel appears not to Mary at all, but to Joseph.

Joseph, throughout history is almost an afterthought and sometimes even forgotten. Even in art Joseph is rarely portrayed. The focus is always on Mary and Jesus, the wisemen and the shepherds. But in Matthew the focus is on Joseph and today we are asked to consider his importance in the whole birth narrative.

Matthew reports that upon learning that Mary was with child, and knowing it was not his, that Joseph had determined to break off the marriage arrangement quietly. In the ancient world, pregnancy outside of marriage brought shame and dishonor upon everyone involved. Joseph was a product of the time and culture in which he lived. And he knows two things. One: Mary is pregnant. Two: It's not his.

Tradition taught that if a woman was accused of adultery, the matter was brought to the town elders. If it was determined that her husband was lying, he would be charged a relatively modest fee. But if it was determined that the charge was true, the woman would be taken to the door of her father's home, where she would be stoned to death. In so doing, the tradition of the law stated, you purged the evil from your midst.

That's what righteousness often was and still is thought to be in some places: the purging of evil in order to pursue the good. Joseph could have put Mary to death. Tradition allowed for it, but Matthew tells us he was unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, and he planned to dismiss her quietly to spare Mary's life and this is when an angel came to Joseph in a dream.

The angel says Mary is going to have a baby, Joseph, and please name him Jesus and raise it as your own." In those days, to name a child was to lay claim to that child's heritage and lineage. In other words, as the author Barbara Brown Taylor wrote, "Joseph is being asked "to be willing to believe in the impossible, to claim the scandal, to adopt this baby and give it his name, to not only accept the whole mess, but to rock it tenderly to sleep in his arms."

Can you imagine having that kind of dream? How would you classify this dream? Was it a wonderful dream? Or the kind that makes you wake up in a cold sweat? I think the answer is, yes to the latter.

Imagine how conflicted Joseph was? God was doing something incredible, and somehow, crazy as it sounded, Mary's child was from God. This child would be the promised Messiah and that's a lot to take in.

I imagine that Joseph may have doubted that dream. Did this really happen? And was it really a dream from God or was it maybe because of something he ate last night?

Joseph had to trust God. Basically, what God says to Joseph is that the decision he has made to quietly divorce her is not good enough. Having compassion and righteousness is just not good enough. The angel is asking him to choose what has been described as a higher righteousness. That sort of righteousness is hard to come by because it's not righteousness that focuses on the law. It focuses on the bigger picture, and it always leans toward love, toward the well-being of others. It pays attention to how our attempts to be righteous can sometimes yield unrighteous consequences. It does not ask, what does the law allow me to do? It asks, what does love compel me to do? What will bring the most light and life into a situation?

It is in this swirl of dreams and consequences that Joseph has to make a decision. He has to balance tradition and law on the one side, and an angel of the Lord seemingly on the other. He has to think about how much one person can handle, what integrity means, and what the bounds of commitment really are, to say nothing of figuring out to whom or to what he is most committed. It is a lot to think about. It's a big question, whether he will permit God to be born, whether he will stay in the midst of it all and give his good name to a scandalous child.

The angel is telling him he needs to exceed righteousness and to choose mercy. Mercy is the most encompassing movement of God's heart. Mercy is an outpouring of costly love and is unexpected evidence of God's gracious generosity. This is what the angel is asking him to do. This is an amazing revelation for Joseph!

The angel who came from God spoke love, was love, and embodied love, in order to cast out Joseph's fear so that he could make the right decision out of merciful love. That Joseph says 'yes' to this just might be the biggest miracle recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

Sometimes we want to make the Christmas story so beautiful and wonderful and peaceful and serene that we lose sight of what the story is all about: full of worries and questions and hardship and much anxiety. These are things we are familiar with.

Looking more closely at Joseph, his conflict, the myriad of choices he had to make, the uneasiness he felt, may help us see how sparkly and sanitized and smooth and easy we have turned the Christmas story into. The Christmas story is more like our own lives that are full of difficulties, questions, uneasiness, wondering if we're doing the right thing.

The angel put Joseph into a situation where he had to make an extremely difficult decision. In the end Joseph chose to be merciful. He chose to put God's merciful love into motion. The scandal of Christmas is the scandal of incarnation – God became human flesh. And through it all, Joseph was there; Strong, quiet, faithful. Joseph's legacy is not in what he says. He is not front and center. Joseph isn't flashy and he doesn't call attention to himself, and none of it is easy, but Joseph speaks volumes by what he does. He listens, he believes, he trusts, he acts, he is faithful and follows the dream which is pure love.

That is the lesson for us, too. Like Joseph, sometimes, we are supposed to trust God and trust our dreams then get out of the way. So you see it doesn't take extraordinary

people to bring God into our midst. Remember like Joseph, we struggle to make the right decisions in life too, seeking deep down to do what is right. The good news is that we're not alone in that process. God is here, sometimes helping us to break decisions that are too small, in order that something even better might be born

Like Joseph, we too have to make a decision. Because the Christ child is waiting to be born again and again. The Christ child is waiting for us to welcome him and make space for him in our lives. Just as Joseph dared to believe the promise of God's messenger; that love can transform all of our messes allowing the very incarnation of God to have life and breath and being in the world so should we dare to believe God is with us so that we too can bring more of God's love into the world. Amen.