

A Holy Dream
Isaiah 7:10-16 and Matthew 1:18-25
The Rev. Layne Brubaker
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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As you know we have four Gospels that tell the story of Jesus... and all of the Gospels have different themes, emphasis and tell differing account of Jesus life and ministry. The birth of Jesus is handled very differently in all four of the Gospels...

The Gospel of Mark doesn't have a birth narrative, Mark's Gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. The Gospel of John gives us a cosmic, theological statement on the Jesus- who is the word and who was with the God from the beginning. Matthew and Luke are the two gospels that give us a detailed account of Jesus birth and in most of our minds (including mine until this past week) we generally conflate the stories found in Luke and Matthew into one story- but in reality Mathew and Luke actually tell different very different stories.

In the Gospel of Luke (which is traditionally read on Christmas Eve) we encounter the birth story through Mary's perspective- the angel appears to Mary announcing the birth of Jesus. It is in Luke that we are given certain details like why Mary and Joseph must travel to Bethlehem, that the inn is too full to accommodate them, and that Jesus is laid in a manger. None of those details are recorded in the Gospel of Matthew. In Luke Angels appear to Shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus who then go and find the baby Jesus. In Luke Angels appear to lots of different people- and appear to people in real life.

In Matthew, the birth announcement from the angel is to Joseph, In Matthew Gospel, we don't ever hear from Mary- In Matthew's gospel there are no shepherds, rather there are Magi (or Kings from the east) who see a star which sends them on a journey to find the newly born king. And in Mathew we encounter King Herrod who is terrified to learn of Jesus' birth- who responds with violence towards newly born children- which causes Jesus and his family to become refugees, fleeing violence and traveling to Egypt. In Mathew there are a bunch of angels appearing to different folks- but the angels only appear in dreams.

When we conflate the two narratives into one story we risk missing out on the theological point the author is making in their particular context. In Luke, the birth of Jesus is revealed to folks who are easy to overlook- people who are on the margins of society and those people respond with joy and worship. In Matthew, the birth of Jesus is revealed to those who have power and wealth- and they respond with either worship or fear.

Several years ago Crawford bought us a beautiful Nativity Set- that was very unique and as I was setting it out I was puzzled because the nativity didn't have any shepherds. The set only included Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and three kings... I remember thinking what sort of nativity would leave out the shepherds? But I have now come to understand that we have a Gospel of Matthew Nativity :)

Our text today opens with *Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.* Now... to be clear, this is an odd story- and our main character Joseph has found himself in a very tricky situation. Contextually and historically we have to understand what it meant that Mary and Joseph were engaged- they lived in a small town called Nazareth, which most likely had a population of around 500 people- Nazareth was a very small town... and this 500 people would have really been more like a collection of large families- so everyone would have most likely known each other and would have known Mary Joseph. And their engagement would have been arranged by their families through a marriage contract... in this culture Mary and Joseph's engagement was as binding as their future marriage.

So Mary's unexpected and unexplained pregnancy would have brought shame not just on Mary and Joseph, but on both Mary and Joseph's entire family. Our Gospel reading tells us that Joseph's initial reaction to keep this news as quiet as possible. I can understand that impulse- often when confronted with a hard truth or reality my first instinct is to just not talk about it...almost like if I don't talk about it, it won't be real.

Joseph being in an incredibly tricky situation anxiously tries to figure out what to do.... And so he settles on "quietly dismissing" Mary... there are plenty of different ways to read this... and often folks interpret Joseph's quiet dismissal as him attempting to do as little harm to Mary as possible.... But I wonder if dismissing Mary quietly has more to do with his own self preservation and less about protecting Mary. Mary is pregnant... and at some point that secret will not be able to stay a secret... So by Joseph dismissing her quietly I think he is really setting her loose in the world to deal with this scandal alone. And giving himself (and his family) distance from the shame that Mary was certain to endure.

But just as Joseph makes up his mind to move forward with dismissing Mary- he has a dream- while sleeping an angel appears to Joseph and tells him:

Carl Jung- a famous and influential psychologist who found dreams to be an important part of the psyche says about dreams

"They do not deceive, they do not lie, they do not distort or disguise ... They are invariably seeking to express something that the ego does not know and does not understand."
(Carl Jung)

In Joseph's dream he encounters an Angel and this is most certainly a Holy Dream-a dream pointing Joseph to the truth- a truth that is certainly beyond his ego. This dream is an intervention from God both for Joseph and for us in that it announces who Jesus is and who Jesus will be to Joseph and to us.

Then Angels tells Joseph, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

When The angels says "Do not be afraid", the angels is saying stop trying to preserve your own dignity, do not let fear guide you .

When the angels says "Take Mary as your wife" the angels is instructing Joseph to do the socially unconventional and shameful thing... the angels is also instructing him to adopt a child that he knows is not his.

When the angels says The child is from the Holy Spirit, the angel is telling Joseph that this child is a unique creation of God.

When the angel instructs Joseph to name the child Jesus, this name means in its Hebrew roots means YHWH saves.... the meaning of this child's name speaks of the child's destiny and also his purpose- God's saves and Jesus saves- Jesus has come to rescue all of us from the huge mess that humans have found ourselves in....

When the angel quotes our Isaiah passage- we are told how Jesus is going to save us... Jesus will be Immanuel- Hebrew for "God with Us" Jesus will save us from our sins, by being God with us- the incarnation means that God has come to live among us to be with us to deliver us from fear, and sin and pain and all that makes human life a mess. God is not an abstract idea, God is Jesus- and Jesus lived on the ground in the flesh among us... and this is God- this is a God who is with us who has utterly bound himself with hopeless sinful humanity, to bring deliverance from that which seems hopeless...

One Commentator states that :

"Joseph shows us a profound trust in today's gospel... God Does not appear to Joseph when he is wide awake and at prayer, there is no assurance of a burning bush or parting clouds on the mountaintop. There is only a dream. Can we trust dreams? Do we not quickly dismiss dreams if we can even recall them a few moments after we wake? The dream, however was enough for Joseph. (feasting on the word)

One could argue that the most remarkable part of this story is that Joseph listens to the angel. Joseph's first reaction to Mary's pregnancy was to quietly distance himself from the scandal and get as far from her as possible... that motivation came from fear... he is afraid of experiencing shame and social isolation... but what we have to realize is that Joseph is the one with social power in this story and in his engagement to Mary. Because he is a man, he is able to distance himself from Mary and he is able to use quietness and secrets as a tool of his social power to keep himself safe from public scrutiny. Once confronted by the angel in his dream, he is told to reject this use of his social power... to not move towards self preservation but rather to use the social and political power that he has to offer protection to Mary and her unborn

child. The Christmas story is not about Joseph- he is basically a regular guy who has found himself caught up in a story much bigger than himself, but Joseph demonstrates what it is to be a good ally...a good partner in crime... He's not important to the story on his own- the story never becomes about him- in fact by the time Jesus ministry begins we don't hear about him anymore..... but Mary a young pregnant girl and Jesus her unborn child are at risk without him. So Joseph shows us how to use our own privilege and power to help those on the margins so that God's incarnation can be born in our midst.

In Matthew's gospel Joseph is the first person we get to see encounter the birth of Jesus- and after his holy dream and his willingness to listen to the angel Joseph chooses to use his social power and go on this remarkable journey. Which will not be easy.... Going forward the journey just gets scary and more complicated- and Joseph will have several more dreams where Angels will show up give him direction on how to keep Jesus and Mary safe. And remarkably Joseph keeps listening and keeps saying yes every time the angels shows up.

Nadia Boaz Weber- a Lutheran pastor, author and podcast or says about this story: "The faith of advent calls us into saying yes to God's yes. A yes that created all that is, including us. A yes that underlies all of love. A yes that addressed a man 2000 years ago who dared to say yes to a dream. A yes that walked among us full of grace and truth and who died and on the 3rd day rose again. It's is God's yes toward you and all that is that continues to define you and animate your lives. So when you are trying to decide what to listen to, tune out the static of all other claims. May it be with you only according to God's will. May your soul feel it's worth."

So on this fourth and final week of Advent... as we complete our journey towards Bethlehem.... As we make our final push through the darkness and look forward to the relief of lighting the Christ Candle on Christmas Eve- I encourage you to be about saying yes to those who are around you... let's all double our acts of kindness this week filling the manger in the narthex to the brim! Let us not be held back by fear or anxiety... but rather let us give what resources we have to offer and let us offer protection to those who need it.... You never know what life line you just might be offering someone. Anxiety, depression, loneliness, isolation- are in fact at an all time high in our world and community- you might not even know that someone near you is suffering in Silence. We do not have to be afraid... for God is with us, and we are called to be God's hands and feet offering love, and care.... Listen to your dreams, listen to God's call...and this week let us be like Joseph- and follow God's Angels wherever they might lead us. And let us be amazed as God Immanuel is made real in our midst. Amen.