

Joseph's Dreams in Matthew 1:18-24, 2:13-15, 19-23

By Patrick Preheim and Patty Friesen (December 11, 2016)

This Third Sunday of Advent is typically called Mary's Sunday but Mary gets plenty of air time during Advent and this lectionary Year A takes us into the Gospel of Matthew, the only gospel that mentions Joseph so we too will give Joseph his due. He may have been tempted to be a deadbeat dad but he has four key dreams that he acts on to save the life of Christ. In a dream Joseph is encouraged to enter into marriage with Mary. In a dream Joseph is warned to leave Bethlehem and go to Egypt. In a dream Joseph is notified that Herod is dead and the coast is clear to return to Israel. In a dream, Joseph is directed to Galilee to raise Jesus.

But it all began when Joseph and Mary were engaged, Mary was found to be with child, Joseph had decided to divorce her quietly. All this is stated in the past tense. Matthew has included this information to get us up to speed, and now the real story begins. "[T]he first action plotted in the story occurs, and it is an act of God, who sends an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream" (M. Eugene Boring, "Gospel of Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (v1 VIII), p. 134). Time and time again in these first episodes we find God directing the drama through dreams. It is God who takes the initiative in the salvation story: not Joseph, not magi, not Herod. We may have been taught that the story is about Mary, Joseph, or even Jesus, but the text suggests otherwise. This is God's story. The first miracle of Matthew's gospel belongs to God, not Jesus. And it is interesting to note that in both the birth and passion narratives even Jesus is a relatively passive participant (*Ibid*).

What do dreams tell us about God? That waiting for God's dream to be worked within us sometimes takes patience. Joseph was ready to take action. Granted, it was action laced with mercy but it was pre-mature action. We, too, are sometimes quick to act. We taught and told to

make our own future, to realize our potential, to work hard towards the dreams that we have. But what about God's dream? It is exceedingly difficult to wait. It is true that at times our over-functioning has much to do with our fears and gets in the way of God's dream for us which often takes time to unfold. We who are taught and programmed to control our world need the gentle reminder that it is God's story of salvation. God does, and will, take initiative. These dreams tell us that God acts in the lives of very high-functioning people. The mark of the righteous, in Matthew's birth narrative and his gospel as a whole, is the one who acts on God's dream. Plan for the future, and also plan that at the first sniff of a God dream to change course.

What do dreams tell us about God? That God also offers guidance to those overwhelmed with the stuff of life. It happens that sometimes we feel stuck in a passive voice: passive, like Joseph and Mary, in the opening sequence of the story. High functioning ancestors, unexpected pregnancies, insomnia punctuated with fear inducing dreams, death threats, frequent moves, a kid with a God complex—these are all burdens of Joseph alluded to in our Matthew text. If it were not for Divine direction I wonder if Joseph would have had the emotional energy to make any decision. Dysfunctional family and friends overwhelm us and put us in a passive voice. Our own health issues and wounded family drain our batteries. Death—a relationship, a friend, a loved one—numbs us. It is overwhelming! In these times it is good for us to remember that this is in moments that God acts. Sometimes a dream takes hold of us in the dark nights. Sometimes a star shines over us. Sometimes strangers bring gifts. God offers us salvation, in part, by simply coming to dwell with us. A dream grows within us and we are propelled in unexpected directions. A dream grows in others and we find ourselves surrounded by people we would not have imagined. God acts even when we feel reduced to passivity and held hostage to the past.

What do dreams tell us about God? That God desires mercy, not sacrifice (Matt 12.7). Mary and Joseph were engaged. This “was a binding arrangement between people already considered to be husband and wife, so that unfaithfulness was considered adultery...The Law of Moses required capital punishment in such cases (Dt 22.23-27). By Matthew’s time, this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating. The first and only thing said about Joseph’s character is that he is “righteous”, a key word in Matthew’s theology, which can also be translated “just”. In Matthew’s setting, to be righteous or just mean[t] to live by the law, God’s revealed will. Joseph, contrary to the behavior expected of one who is “just” had already decided not to go by the letter of the law, but chose out of consideration for Mary to divorce her quietly” (ibid). Joseph is “righteous” because he acted merciful. Jesus echoes this divine sentiment numerous times in his ministry. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy” we hear later in the Beatitudes (5.7). God desires mercy, not sacrifice, we hear in chapter 12. More importantly, though, our ability to perceive mercy in our own lives depends on our ability to extend mercy (5.7). We inherit the kingdom, we inherit Christ, Christ is born in us, when we practice mercy. Much is lost without mercy.

The dreams of Matthew 1 & 2 also provide insight how Matthew understands Jesus. This is accomplished through a deft connection to Israel’s history. Take, for example, the name the man to whom Mary is engaged: Joseph. Do some of us remember another Joseph in the Biblical story? Perhaps the Joseph, son of Jacob, who is centre stage of the salvation story described in Genesis 37-50. That Joseph was also famous for dreaming. His dreams got him sent to Egypt. His dreams saved his people from famine. His dreams saved all manner of refugees from Palestine and throughout Egypt. His dreams prepared the way for the Hebrews exodus from Egypt into the Promised Land (Gen 50.24). Here in Matthew’s Gospel we have another Joseph

who dreams. His dreams also got him sent to Egypt. The child of his dreaming, Jesus, would save feed hungry souls (Matt 15.32-38). The child of his dreaming would shelter all manner of refugee throughout the world (Matt 28.19). The child of his dreaming was to lead his people, and all people, out of bondage into a good and Promised Land. It might be significant to also mention at this point that the angel directs Joseph to name the boy Jesus. Why might that be significant? Because the Hebrew translation of the name Jesus is Joshua and Joshua, if we remember of Jewish history, is the one who led the children of Israel into the Promised Land. When not used as a proper name Joshua itself means “deliver”. The intentional use of names and dreams ties the story of Jesus into the larger salvation history of God.

And if we failed to pick up on these connections we find copious O.T. citations throughout Matthew’s Gospel. Why is this important? Jesus is the fulfillment of O.T. expectations: he comes not abolish the Law and prophets but to fulfill (Matt 5.17) Jesus is the descendant of Joseph who saves not only his people but all people throughout the world. We simply can not get our minds around who this Jesus person will become, so this gospel writer uses historical allusions to help us expand our ideas of who the Christ is.

“Joseph becomes...a model for the Christian life. He learns that being truly righteous does not mean looking up a rule in a book and then doing the ‘right thing’; it means wrestling with the complexities of a problem, listening for the voice of God, and then doing God’s thing”
(Thomas Long quoted in Alyce M. McKenzie’s *Matthew* as a part of the Interpretation Bible Studies, p. 14)

“For Matthew, active deeds of righteousness are an integral part of faithfulness. Joseph is an example of the genuine, active righteousness Matthew commends. Like the others mentioned in the genealogy, Joseph acted in a manner not expected by the social mores of his times...Joseph

acted out of mercy in the cause of justice, not out of ritual obedience in the cause of conventional piety” (Ibid 16).

Jesus will need a father as he grows to manhood, not just any father, but one like Joseph, one who will teach him to take risks like the ones Joseph took, for he will be tempted not to take them. He will need a father like Joseph to teach him to withstand the disapproval of others, as Joseph had to withstand it. He will need a father like Joseph to teach him what to do in situations like this one...to model how to believe the unbelievable...and to walk ahead in faith.

Let us pray...Thank you God for Joseph, for his sensitivity to dreams and to your voice and work in the world. Thank you for his courage and that he modelled trust in you. Amen.