

By this time in December, some of us, I'm sure, are starting to have disturbing dreams about not being ready for Christmas, or of strange and unpredictable mishaps messing up our plans. Sometimes our perfectly reasonable anxieties trigger dreams of completely missing an important event, or turning up to it in our pajamas. Or worse: turning up without even our pajamas!

Dreaming is a critical function of the brain. Research shows that sleep doesn't actually do us very much good without the dreaming, whether we remember the dreams or not, but we know next to nothing at all about how dreams work. Some dreams seem to jumble random pieces of memory that the brain hasn't filed away yet, but some dreams seem to allow things deep in the unconscious to bubble through to conscious thought, and some even make things clear in a new way that conscious thought missed.

Today's gospel is about a dream. Joseph's dream. The gospel of Matthew doesn't say much at all about Mary. Only Luke's gospel talks at length about Mary, and, since practically all of our familiar Christmas story comes from Luke, that's what we know best. The other two gospels don't say anything at all about the birth of Jesus, and Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus from King David through Joseph's ancestors and tells the story entirely from Joseph's point of view.

And in the piece we heard today, Joseph had a dream. A dream that asked him to find it in his heart to trust. Just that. It didn't ask him to do anything; in fact it specifically asked him NOT to do anything. Don't get upset. Don't put her away. Just trust. Trust God. Trust Mary.

Matthew's way of telling the story is quite different from Luke's version, that we know so much better. Matthew says that Mary "was found to be with child." That doesn't sound as if she told anyone; it sounds like they found out some other way. So, who told Joseph? It doesn't sound like it was Mary. Maybe someone told Joseph that Mary was pregnant, but that she claimed she was still a virgin, and she had some bizarre story that nobody believed. Or maybe Mary hadn't said anything at all to anyone about it.

She would have good reason not to tell anyone. First of all, she might still be having difficulty believing it herself, but there was also the problem of what might happen to her. She and Joseph

were betrothed. Not married. For her to be pregnant before being properly married was a capital offense. Literally: a capital offense. If Joseph wanted to, he was within his rights to insist that Mary be stoned to death.

But Matthew tells us that Joseph was a decent sort of man and didn't want to see Mary punished, so he was quite willing to just let her go away somewhere. And then he changed his mind. From what we know about him, Joseph was a conventional sort of man. It would have been easy to just make the whole problem go away as quietly as possible, and get on with his life.

If Mary **had** told her family about the circumstances of her pregnancy, they probably thought that she was crazy as well as pregnant and they would be looking for some safe place to lock her up. And when Joseph told them that he was going to trust God and to trust Mary, the family probably thought they were both crazy!

And maybe they were. Maybe it takes a certain kind of crazy to be able to make a commitment like that. These two people, together, decided to trust God and deal with the ridicule and the hardship, because it was too important not to. The life of this child was too valuable to forsake, and they would put up with whatever they had to, so that this child would be known to the world.<sup>1</sup>

The angel didn't give Joseph an explanation: he just asked him to trust that God had a plan and that he was part of it.

Now, I don't think I have ever been visited by an angel, even in a dream – well, at least not one that identified itself as an angel or that I could recognize as one. But there have been times when someone who didn't look like an angel has said something **so** significant that it changed my thinking and my direction completely. And there certainly have been times when everything that I thought should be, suddenly wasn't, and I had no idea where the future was going. I'd be very surprised if you haven't all had the same experience at least once.

And how do we usually respond? We fight it. We howl about how this is not what we wanted, or what we deserved, or what should have been. Once in a while, perhaps, we look back, later, and see that everything really did work out for the best in the end, in ways we couldn't possibly have seen

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<sup>1</sup>The Rev. Daniel P. Matthews, Jr

from where we were standing then. Other times, we just have to accept that it's not given to us to see the whole picture.

Would it have helped Joseph if the angel told him the whole story from beginning to end? Probably not. Would Joseph have been willing to start this whole thing if he had known exactly what was to come? Probably not. But, when it had all unfolded, would he ever regret having taken that step of faith? Definitely not.

Agatha Christie wrote a short Christmas story, in which an angel appears to Mary and shows her what the future holds for her child. She is shown how her son will be betrayed, and condemned, and suffer a cruel death. And the angel gives her a choice. Because God loves her, the angel says, she will be allowed to avoid this terrible future by sending the child back to God right now, so that there will be no suffering.

Mary thinks hard about what she has been shown, and eventually she decides that she will not send her child back. God gave him to the world, she reasons, and God had a reason. If God wants things to unfold like that, then God must have a purpose. The angel is furious – because he is not an angel from God; he is Satan, the fallen angel, and he has failed to tempt Mary away from God's purpose.

God often asks us to take small steps; to step out in faith; to trust. We don't get to see the whole picture up front. We don't get to hear the whole plan and evaluate it before we commit ourselves. We are asked to trust that there IS a plan, and that it will unfold as it should. We are asked to keep faith.

Matthew puts Joseph in the centre of this story, because without Joseph it wouldn't have happened. It wouldn't have happened without Mary, of course, but it couldn't have happened without both of them. Together. God works through the love and support that we give one another. God speaks to us in unexpected ways. And God understands how hard we find it to let go of our own notions of how things should be.

Joseph gave Mary the greatest gift there was: he trusted her. And together they trusted God and went on to face whatever the future held. And that is a truly priceless gift.

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May you receive – and give – the priceless gifts of trust and faith to those that you love this Christmas.

Amen.