Joseph the Dreamer

December 12, 2010

I will let you in on a little secret – Matthew is my least favorite gospel. Really. It’s not even a contest. I’m always dreading year A in the lectionary because it is Matthew focused. But Matthew is really the only gospel that tells Joseph’s story – although Matthew doesn’t say much! – and so I’ve found myself trying to set aside my bias and hearing Matthew tell his familiar story with new ears.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘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. When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt.

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Dreams figure heavily in Matthew’s gospel, not just in Joseph’s story, but throughout the narrative. I opened up my bible concordance and flipped to the d’s looking for all the entries about dreams. There were LOTS from the Old Testament and just a few from the Gospels and letters of Paul, mostly from Matthew.

Now how many of you dream? How many of you remember them? Lately for me, it’s been like someone has unplugged my power cord from the moment my head hits the pillow until the dog licks my hand or Ains crawls into bed to make me ‘imaginary breakfast’ in the morning. When I do remember what I’ve dreamed about, it’s some sort of sensory mash up of things I’ve been watching, reading or thinking about. Like dreams where Scottish immigrants are on spaceships smuggling goods across the galaxy while running guns with their motorcycle club.

Joseph on the other hand, allowed his dreams to change his life. In truth, most of the changing comes from the other main actor in Matthew’s version of the birth narrative – the Holy Spirit. For Matthew, the two most important parts of the story are Joseph and the Holy Spirit. The messenger who appears to Joseph takes the role of voicing God’s plan.

Joseph clearly saw God at work, and Matthew tells us that when he awoke, he did as God asked. This is repeated not once, not twice, but three times. Communication through dreams is not something unusual in the Hebrew tradition. Samuel, Jacob, Joseph (in Egypt), Solomon, Jeremiah, Daniel – Joseph of Nazareth is simply another in a long line. Joseph knew the stories about the Spirit stirring over the waters of creation, bringing order out of chaos; or breathing creative force into the dust that we’re all made of; or stirring over Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones – recreating them and bringing new life. As a righteous and faithful man Joseph recognized and trusted in the call and movements of the Spirit.

As Kent has pointed out over the last two weeks - The writer of Matthew goes to extended lengths to demonstrate that Jesus was, according to Jewish law, the son of Joseph and therefore descended from King David. But Matthew equally focuses on the Spirit’s activity in the life of the Holy Family. It is as if he wanted to deliberately hold the two elements in tension – the work of humans and the work of God. Everything Joseph did was
right – the accepting Mary, claiming the child Jesus – but we know that it wasn’t simply Joseph’s doing. In each moment of this narrative, God is at work over and under and around us all.

Joseph recognized that something beyond his ken was at work and saw his role in the larger drama. This story we gather to hear again and again, this birth narrative, is a radically new beginning and more importantly – it’s God’s doing, not our own! This advent is something for which human beings, no matter how worthy or highly credentialed, can claim no credit. Matthew simply reinforces that.

So what do we learn from Joseph’s story? That unexpected things, things outside convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work. We often forget what a scandal the incarnation really must have been, both Mary’s pregnancy and Joseph’s decision not to dismiss her quietly or shame her publically. It is not something that would easily have been forgotten in a community the size of Nazareth.

Spirit-led events take us places we don’t intend and show us things we didn’t know. Joseph wasn’t planning for this life. But he accepted its coming anyway. As Joseph journeyed toward that first Christmas he didn’t know where God was taking his new family – only that something wonderful had been promised and that they were beckoned to follow. Joseph’s story calls us to follow as well.

Like the story Will Willimon tells of a young girl who went off to college, but not just any college. She went to one of the elite schools, one that regularly makes the U.S. News and World Report’s Top 10. What was all the more impressive was that she was the first in her family to even go beyond high school. Never before had it happened, and her family was rightly proud. They looked forward to her future. They just knew that someday they would introduce her as "Our daughter the doctor" or "Our daughter the lawyer." And it was possible. She had that kind of mind and drive.

But something happened there at college. Something got into her-and it was God. And that changed everything-even her relationship to her parents. No longer was their dream her dream. She began to hear God’s dream. And so today, when her parents are asked about her, they have had to learn to say, "Our daughter? Oh, she's a Peace Corp volunteer digging ditches in Ethiopia."

Or to follow like Oswald Smith. In 1920 Oswald stood before a missionary board. One dream dominated his heart. He wanted to be a missionary. Over and over again, he prayed, "Lord, I want to go as a missionary for you. Open a door of service for me." Now, at last, his prayer would be answered. When the examination was over, the board turned Oswald Smith down. He did not meet their qualifications. He failed the test. Oswald Smith had set his direction, but now life gave him a detour. What would he do? As Oswald Smith prayed, the Spirit moved and God’s dream was planted. If he could not go as a missionary, he would build a church which could send out missionaries. And that is what he did. Oswald Smith pastured The People's Church in Toronto, Canada, which sent out more missionaries than any other church at that time.

I think the most important thing we learn from Joseph is that advent means change. It did for Joseph, just as for us. We gather to celebrate a birth that promises to change the world—but rarely in ways we imagine. As we sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and pray “Come, Lord Jesus”, we are asking for our lives to be overturned. Eugene H Peterson tells us that “the work of the Spirit in creation no longer is confined to asking the questions “When did this take place? How did this happen?” We are now asking, “How can I get in on this? Where is my place in this?” and praying, “Create in me…” (Ps 51:10)."

Are we prepared to hear God’s call this advent season? Are we looking for the movement of the Spirit in our lives? Are we kneeling before the manger praying “Create in me a clean heart of God and put a new and right spirit within me”?

The dream was enough for Joseph.

What would it take for you and me to hear God’s messengers?

I have learned recently that over time, trees that have to stand out in the open become shaped in the direction the wind is generally blowing. I knew that plants would grow toward the light, but I didn’t know this about trees. Unless there are other trees around to block it from happening, a tree will eventually be shaped by the force and direction of the wind.
After a day like yesterday that’s not so hard to imagine.

Do we, as individuals, and as a congregation, show any evidence of being shaped by the Winds of God’s spirit? Of being bent and molded to God’s will?

How would our lives show the marks if, like Joseph, we trusted God’s dreams?

Friends, I can only imagine. But I do know that the Christ child was born into this world, that we might take the risk and find out. Amen.

i Matthew 1:20, 24; 2:13-14, 19-23. NRSV.


