

2022 12 18 – Joseph’s Dream

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25 (The Inclusive Bible)

“This is how the birth of Jesus came about.” That’s how today’s scripture begins. I really appreciate that every three years our lectionary brings us back to this story, to Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus. You probably noticed that it’s much shorter than the one in the Gospel of Luke. It leaves out the choir of angels, the shepherds and even the stable. Can you imagine Christmas without the crèche and all the carols about angels, and shepherds and the manger? Can you imagine Christmas without the Magi bringing their gifts? You see, that part of the story comes from this gospel, the Gospel of Matthew. The way we usually tell the Christmas story is actually a wonderful collage of different stories all combined into one. But I do appreciate this variation of the Christmas story because it brings into focus the role of Joseph, the father of Jesus.

In Matthew’s version, Joseph is the one who is visited by an angel in a dream. But even before we get to Joseph’s dream, lots of drama has already happened. In the very first sentence we read, “When Jesus’ mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.” In first century Galilee or Judea that would have been devastating news. In those days a betrothal was a legally binding contract and required a divorce to break it. As far as Joseph knew, this was adultery, the kind of offence for which women could be stoned. When Joseph heard that news of Mary’s pregnancy he would have been shocked and dismayed.

Just imagine the thoughts that would have gone through this mind. I'm sure his first assumption was that Mary had been unfaithful. Sure, she said she was still a virgin, but really, why would God choose her, a lowly peasant, to carry his Holy Child? And even if Joseph believed her, who else would? If he stood by her, he would be ridiculed in the community, his honour would be shattered. Even his carpentry business would probably suffer. No one would expect him to continue their betrothal under these circumstances. He was in a dilemma, no matter what he decided, someone was going to be hurt.

But Joseph obviously cared for Mary, or at least regarded her and her family with some respect. In the next sentence we read, "Joseph, her husband, an upright person unwilling to disgrace her, decided to divorce her quietly." He could have made a big scene. He could have announced her condition to the community and loudly condemned her. He could have had her stoned in the marketplace as an example to all other adulterers. But instead, Joseph decided to divorce her quietly. Maybe he believed her, maybe he was just a good guy who didn't want to hurt her, maybe he actually had feelings for her. We really have no way of knowing what was going on in his head.

One thing we do know is that life is messy. We often find ourselves in situations that don't seem to have an easy resolution. Sometimes we struggle with our relationships, sometimes the issues are financial and sometimes life just feels overwhelming. Some of us may be feeling that way right now. Often, like Joseph, we try to find an easy way out, a quick solution, a way to avoid the pain and the struggle.

Joseph had already made up his mind and then he had a dream and in the dream this Angel of God said to him, “Joseph, heir to the House of David, don’t be afraid to wed Mary; it is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son, and you are to name him Jesus.” So Joseph wakes up from this dream and obviously remembers what the Angel said—which is a miracle in itself—and then he has to decide how he is going to respond to this message from God. He’s already made his decision, so one obvious option would be to just ignore the dream.

But Joseph doesn’t ignore it, does he? The story tells us, “When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of God had directed, and they went ahead with the marriage. He did not have intercourse with her until she had given birth; she had a son, and they named him Jesus.”

What was it that changed Joseph’s mind? One of the first things that the angel said to him was, “don’t be afraid to wed Mary.” Joseph had lots of reasons to be afraid. He was concerned about his honour. He was afraid of being ridiculed. And if he believed Mary and the angel, if this baby really was the offspring of God, then who was he to raise it? That’s a pretty daunting task for a peasant carpenter! Of course Joseph was afraid.

But Joseph found the courage to make the more difficult choice. I believe he found that courage because he knew this was the right choice, it was the choice for love and for justice. I believe he found the strength because he knew that he wasn’t alone in his decision. He knew that God, the Essence of Love, was with

him. I believe he found the courage because in that moment he recognized that the baby that Mary was carrying was beloved, a beloved child of God.

In making the more difficult choice Joseph surrendered to Holy Mystery. He let go of his own desire to control the situation and he trusted that life would unfold as it should. In making this choice Joseph allowed the Spirit of Love into his heart and he allowed that Spirit to take him forward through his fear and trepidation.

Life is full of hardship. Life is full of difficult choices. But we are not alone in the midst of the messiness. God is with us. May we allow the love of God, the love of family, and the love of friends to give us the strength and the courage to make the right choices. May we allow the love we feel for ourselves, for our family, and for the Holy Mystery to give us the strength and the courage to let go and let God. May it be so. Amen.