

Joseph Dreams

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Third Sunday of Advent - December 11, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 1:18-25

SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
the crocus shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads, they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



Matthew 1:18-25

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. Word of God, Word of Life.

Have you ever made a difficult choice based on a dream? Or maybe you didn't and then wished you had? Then again, maybe for you the message didn't come through an angel. But if an angel came to you in a dream with clear instructions, would you believe and act on it? Would you even admit it if you did?

How *do* you make difficult choices? Too often, I think, we try to reason our way to a decision. Sometimes what we need to do is get out of our heads and get in touch with our bodies—our senses, our emotions, our hearts. Listen to our better, braver angels. I believe that most of us want to do the right thing but we sometimes have a hard time doing it. We settle for doing the expected thing, the safe thing.

Joseph was an honorable man, a righteous man. The Bible doesn't say it in so many words but legend makes him an old man, too, less likely to behave recklessly, or take risks that threaten his standing in the community. He resolves to dismiss Mary quietly. That means, not having her publicly stoned for adultery. Even if he figures it's the kindest way, it still signifies Teflon Joseph, Velcro Mary. I remember the female comedian who was asked if she had any children. "No," she replied, "at least none that I know of." Somehow, women can't get away with the things men do.



But Joseph was also a dreamer, who trusted the messages of his dreams and acted on them. Truth is, he had four angelic dreams in the first two chapters of Matthew. That's two more than the other Joseph, the one with the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. After Jesus' birth, an angel appears again to Joseph in a dream and tells him to flee to Egypt as refugees. There, he's informed in another dream when it's safe to come home. And once they get home, an angel shows up in yet one more dream and tells him to move the family to Nazareth, *now*. Mary says yes. Joseph acts.



Once persuaded by the first dream angel, he's all in. Do you think he ever regretted it? We don't hear much about him after Jesus is grown up. Jesus is called "the carpenter's son," revealing Joseph's humble but respectable origins. But art and legend show him as being close to his son, a good father. Certainly one willing to do anything for the sake of his family. He didn't urge Mary to get an abortion (and yes, they've been around forever), he wasn't an absent father or an abusive husband. He wasn't afraid to take risks for his family.

I was moved by a comment on this text, from our Generation to Generation Advent devotional. Christine Hong, a Korean American scholar, reminds us that we are confronted daily with opportunities to do right by others and the world, but decline to do so when it puts our own privilege and power at risk. "Risk



discomforts power,” she says. “Too often I witness white folx evade doing the right thing in justice work. Polite excuses arise—excuses that claim to ‘make room’ for BIPOC voices by declining to use their own voices.... How about risking solidarity? I sometimes wonder about and wish for divine intervention in these moments,” she says. Do you, too? Would we listen even to an angel?

During our recent discussions about how to distribute the tithe, the first 10%, of Margaret’s bequest, the committee has faced difficult choices together. I personally believe we have experienced divine intervention. It is a testament to the work of the Spirit that opinions are expressed without rancor, and that in each decision, we move toward unity rather than majority rule. But, as one member pointed out, among the proposals submitted, we cannot make a bad choice. Any choice will benefit members of the community in need, or at risk - disproportionately women and children. Disproportionately people of color in Rochester. Any choice is a good choice, yet no gift is nearly enough to address the overwhelming need.

Others make harder choices. One of *The Atlantic*’s top news photos of 2022 shows Stanislav saying goodbye to his 2-year-old son, David, and his wife, Anna, at Kyiv station on March 3. Stanislav stayed to fight while his family left Ukraine to seek refuge in a neighboring country, during the early days of Russia's invasion. What do you suppose it cost him to decide his family would have to live as refugees while he went to war?



Saul, age 4, wipes tears from the face of his father, Franklin Pajaro, after they were expelled from the U.S. and sent back to Mexico near the International border bridge, in Ciudad Juarez, on October 17. What factors led Franklin to risk bringing his young son across the border in the first place? Poverty? Hunger? Political violence? A dream of a better life? Possibly a dream message from an angel?

We cannot fix every problem in the world by our well wishes or our few dollars. But we can fix some. We can use our hands, our voices, our privilege. We can use our curious minds, our discernment in the interpretation of facts to make informed choices. And we can listen to our better angels, our braver angels. We can set aside words and reasoning and listen to our bodies, our senses, our emotions. We can do what God whispers in our hearts is right.

I invite you to close your eyes and imagine Christmas as you hope to experience it. Who’s there with you? What are the decorations like? What’s on the table? What’s under the tree?

Now look at the picture on the right. What would Christmas look like with the family who lives here? Where's the tree? The lights? The food? The guests? The gifts?



And we act. What message do your better, braver angels have for you and your loved ones today? Dream and pray with me for a few minutes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyzLh84O0c4>

Image credits

Blossoming desert and blue dreaming Joseph: A Sanctified Art

From **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN:

Gandolfi, Gaetano, 1734-1802. Joseph's Dream, 1790.

Peter Koenig, The Census, 2015.

Bondone, Giotto di, 1266?-1337. Birth of Christ.

Photographs of contemporary fathers, *The Atlantic*

All others in the public domain

Prayers

God of step-fathers and adopted parents, God of angel messengers and newborn kings, we bow our heads today with praise in our hearts, for who but you would pick out two such ordinary folks to be God's parents? Who but you would assume the best of fragile human hearts?

Help us to be like Joseph, who reminds us that grace is within reach.

In a world full of competition, help us choose celebration;

In a world full of scarcity, help us choose abundance,

In a world full of war and violence, help us choose peace and grace;

In a world of divided lines, help us choose connection and relationship;

In a world full of assumptions and stereotypes, help us choose curiosity and compassion;

Here in Rochester, help us choose community, generosity, healing, reconciliation.

May our better, braver angels never cease to show us the better way.

Remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray: Our Father and Mother in heaven....