
What if I Don't Dream?

A sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Matthew 1:18-25

Well, here we are. The fourth Sunday of Advent, and the air is crackling with excitement. If we have managed to hold on to some Advent observance before today, I suspect the live animals in Child Hall, the singing of Christmas Carols, and the Christmas pageant rehearsal in about an hour, will forever banish any semblance of holding Christmas at bay until Tuesday. We may have even greeted one another with a Merry Christmas as we walked in this morning.

If you think I am about to launch into a tirade about the loss of Advent in the church as we are swept away in anticipatory excitement about Christmas, you can relax. I am not. Even if I thought it was possible, I have decided this year, I am not sure it is even helpful. If you are already stressed by what is still left undone, my reminding you that you should have also been finding time for extra prayer is not going to help.

And I have a confession to make. Every year I dutifully prepare an Advent wreath for my family. I look forward to praying with it each night. I imagine the candles diminishing over the course of the weeks, emerging with their different lengths. That first candle will get the most burn time and be close to a stub by today. When I go on retreat during Advent or pass the one in the narthex here at the Cathedral, I am drawn to it, and filled with horror. Because you see, for whatever reason, I can never get it together with the family Advent wreath.

This year was no different. I even bought a brand new set of candles at the Cathedral bookstore, thinking that might inspire me. I have a pottery wreath, so I even relieved myself of the pressure of adding fresh greenery to it. This year, I would just focus on the light and candles. When my daughter Rebecca returned from college this week, she took one look at the wreath on the kitchen table and said, "Wow, you didn't even make it past week one this year." Yes, only the first candle even had some sign of burn time.

While the season of Advent is often offered as some sort of counter-cultural immunization, it is simply not up to the task for all of us. Nor would the scriptures indicate that is its primary purpose. Not only is it filled with somewhat confusing revelations about the second coming, irascible characters like John the Baptist, this Sunday, we get the birth. Huh? So, if Advent is not intended as some sort of liturgical spa escape, I wonder what it can offer.

Well, the birth story today, just a few days before we hear it again, does have something important. Because in year A at least, we get to be reminded about someone who tends to fade into the background of most nativity scenes. While I have seen lives at risk over who gets to be Mary in a Christmas pageant, I am not sure I have ever heard any real distress about who gets to play Joseph. And frankly, most boys I know actually are not excited about having to pretend to be married to some girl about to give birth. It is awkward. The costume is nothing compared to the wise men or the roman soldiers. They are coached to regard a plasticine infant with interest, even when the wise men show up with far more interesting offerings.

So, what is it about Joseph?

What Matthew reminds us of this morning, is that there is actually quite a lot to notice about Joseph. He may be the shadowy figure off to the side in most paintings with Mary and the Christ child illumined by holy light, but he takes center stage in this birth narrative. We have no annunciation to Mary in Matthew. We have no idea what she even thinks about the idea. And while the story of Mary is one of my favorite in scripture, there is a gift in thinking about Joseph.

We are told that Joseph is a righteous man, as he gets ready to dismiss Mary quietly. It may be helpful to remember that dismissing her without public humiliation was actually the kindest of his options. His betrothal to Mary would have been considered a binding contract or covenant, including a public ceremony, followed by some interim period before the wedding. It was not just a matter of returning the ring and calling the engagement off. Mary, by showing up pregnant, would have forever compromised their standing in the community. And frankly we have to think that Joseph must have imagined the worst at being told the news.

But we don't really know do we?

Now here is where I wish we had a little more detail from Matthew. At least in Luke we get to hear Mary's questions about what it means to bear God. We get to hear her wonder why she has been selected. The angel shows up in real time, not only a dream, and has more to say. We hear about her ongoing journey as she travels to see her cousin Elizabeth.

You can probably tell it is my favorite. You know why? Because it is frankly sounds much more like the story women would tell when gathered around the table for a long Saturday breakfast.

Matthew's account is much more like the response I get when my husband returns from watching a basketball game with his college buddies. He may have been gone for a whole afternoon with our dearest friends, but when I ask for any updates, I get nothing. At best, it is only the most bare bones account. Someone has made a major life change, like a new job. When I ask why, the most common response I get is, "I don't know, I didn't ask." There is just a notation of the major movements and actions, with very little fluff around the whys and wherefores.

As I have pondered Joseph this year, there is something rather wonderful about the sparseness of the account. He is much more of a blank canvas, which in a way makes him more accessible. His journey is probably more like most of ours than Mary's. We all get news we didn't expect. A pregnancy, a diagnosis, a betrayal, a loss. And then we have to figure out what is next. And, if it involves someone we are deeply connected to, it is even more difficult. Who is this person? A betrayer? Or a God bearer?

The gift of Joseph to us is not just that he has a powerful dream from an angel. However the message was received, it clearly was a powerful enough for him to change his entire course of action. He goes from sending Mary away to becoming her chief protector. He takes on the responsibility for naming Jesus, which forever claims him as his legal son. He will be the one who takes them to Egypt to protect them from the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. His life in some ways is more difficult. He is going to act in a way that his community may never understand. He may have to suffer the occasional doubt along the way as he questions his dream. But something has shifted deeply for him. He has a new awareness of God with him, and that has caused him to act.

But what about when we don't get an Angel? What if there is no dream to give us peace?

I think the message of fourth Advent is simply this. We don't have to rely on a new dream, because we can claim the dream of Joseph. We can hear the words of the angel as speaking directly to us. "Do not be afraid." "God is with us."

The situation we find ourselves may still be difficult. It may take us awhile to recover from the surprise. There still may be a mess to clean up, relationships to be restored, treatment plans to decide upon. But our ability to be hopeful and move into action may be simply claiming the dream of Joseph. The birth of Jesus does not guarantee we will not face difficulties in our lives. But it does give us the hope of experiencing those events very differently. The verifiable facts may be unchanged, but we will be transformed. Because we will be people of faith and hope. That is the gift of Emmanuel.

Amen

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