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Dream Well

Matthew 1:18-25, 2:10-15a, 19-21 New Revised Standard Version 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.... When [the wise men] saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. 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, and remained there until the death of Herod.... 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.

It was a few days before Christmas. A man woke up one morning and told his wife, "I just dreamed that you gave me a bottle of that wonderful single malt scotch that I love. What do you think this dream means?" "Oh," his wife replied, "you'll know in a few days." A couple of days later, on Christmas Eve, he again turned to his wife and said the same thing, "I had that dream again: that you gave me a bottle of that

expensive but exquisite scotch for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And his wife replied, "You'll know tomorrow." On Christmas morning, the man woke up and smiled at his wife, "I just dreamed it again: that you gave me that bottle of scotch for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And she smiled back, "You'll know in a few minutes; let's go open our presents." And underneath the tree, with his name on it, was a beautifully wrapped small but tall box. He was delighted. He opened it gently. And when he did, he found - a book! A book entitled The Meaning of Your Dreams.

I learned something this week. You know how when you are falling asleep, you sometimes begin to have those very weird dreams, sometimes anxiety dreams (mine is usually, like one last week, about getting to church and finding that I'd forgotten my sermon and that the pulpit had been removed and that I'd forgotten to put pants on), and then your whole body jerks? Those spasms are called "hypnic jerks" and they are almost always harmless and scientists don't know, really, why they occur or what their purpose might be. But, in fact, scientists and researchers and doctors still can't adequately explain why we sleep at all! As one writer puts it, "For all that we know about the human body these days, scientists do not know the exact reason that we need sleep. We know why we need food, shelter, and clothing; but we do not know why we need sleep."¹ But let's take it one step further, why do we need to **dream** while we sleep? For we most assuredly do, and study after study show that even those who claim to never dream actually do, quite actively, even if those dreams have vanished

¹http://day1.org/1070-believe_in_the_dreams_of_the_person_you_love

from consciousness upon awaking.

This morning I'm going to tell you the answer to the question. It's not from scientific studies but from my observing so many folks over so many years, folks who have done more than they ever possibly thought they could, folks who have found themselves changed in ways that they never expected, folks who have found their biases and prejudices overcome in ways that they never would have predicted, folks who have found a purpose for their lives that unexpectedly animated them: We need to sleep because we need to dream. ***We need to dream.*** Consider Joseph in Matthew's telling of the Christmas story. We don't know a lot about Joseph from the story itself, but over the centuries, Church tradition has said that he was one of those folks who was solid, not flashy, dependable, not given to flights of fancy, down-to-earth, realistic, and prudent. After all, what is that conservative mantra that a budding carpenter first learns? "Measure twice, cut once." As one preacher puts it, "When Matthew describes Joseph as just and righteous, we picture an earnest, meticulous craftsman whose carpentry business is all the excitement he wants."² And yet, not once but three times in the Christmas story, Joseph – solid, earnest, down-to-earth Joseph – has a dream and instead of dismissing those dreams, he follows them. Let us then look at each of those dreams, and I believe we will learn something about the faith that Christ calls us to.

The first dream in the story is the one that is most familiar. Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant. Now, this had to be an agonizing discovery. For you see, in that

²<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/article/entry/4440/josephs-dreams>

day, the custom was that young people were engaged to be married a year before they were actually wed. But the law of the day was that that engagement was just as serious as a marriage. If one or the other died during that engagement period, the other would be referred to as a widow or widower. And the stated punishment for adultery during that engagement was one of two things: either Joseph could have demanded that Mary be stoned to death, or he could, with two witnesses present, simply present her with a letter that said "I divorce you." It was the latter that he had apparently decided on when the story tells us that "being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, [he] planned to dismiss her quietly."

In other words, in the midst of an agonizing situation, where it seemed that the only choices were not good – as sometimes is the case in any of our lives – Joseph chose what seemed to be the least bad option. And if that had indeed been the decision he'd carried through on, he would not have been long remembered, except by family and friends. They would have remembered him as one who chose not to harm the person whom he *thought* had betrayed him - a choice that indeed would have taken courage and righteousness and an ability to rise above the sly taunts that no doubt would have come his way. But he didn't do this, did he? For God sent him a dream. And in that dream, he was told to take Mary as his wife and that the child she was carrying was of God and would be the Savior of the world.

What do we do with this and what do we learn from this? Just this: Sometimes God indeed will place before us a new thing, a new way. Now, we should never claim that lightly or in a self-justifying way or rationalizing way. There are good reasons for the values, the teachings, the norms that we, as ones who would be righteous

ourselves, try to follow. But sometimes, sometimes, indeed: God sends a new thing, a new way. And that is what God did with Joseph, and that is what God sometimes does with us. For you see, what undergirds and grounds the witness of scripture and tradition is the very thing that God will sometimes call us to be and do even as it goes **beyond** that scripture and tradition, as it did with Joseph. After all, when Bible-believing folks in the first half of the 19th century dreamed well, God offered them a new thing but one in fact based on the love for **all** creation that animates the story of God's people – and so increasing numbers of those folks said that while the Bible did not disapprove of slavery, surely to dream well on God's behalf means to go beyond those words in love to a new thing, a new way.³ Or when the words of the Bible have said that those of a certain race or orientation were to be accursed, over the centuries increasing numbers of people were able to dream along with God a new dream for a reality which, based on God's love for each and all, welcomed everyone to the Lord's house and table. And when Joseph had a dream, it too was from God, and it too went beyond what the tradition, what his Bible had taught him – and yet that dream was actually based on the very love animating that Bible and that tradition but now writ so much larger. My friends, there are times that that sort of expansion of love beyond what we have been taught, beyond what we had always thought, will be our opportunity too. And when it is, let us, with Joseph, *dream well, dream well.*

Joseph also had a second dream as the story tells it. *"...an angel of the Lord*

³The Rev. Barbara Blaisdell eloquently and persuasively addresses this "going beyond to a new thing" in a different context her excellent sermon "The Gospel Unhindered - Or, Curing the Nasties," preached at First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado, February 10, 2010.

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.' I did a little survey this week of how the word “dream” gets used in the media and advertising. And what I discovered will not surprise you. So many advertisers tell us that to dream well is have dreams of the things that you can have or buy that will make your life more comfortable or your tastes more sated. A travel agency entices you on your “dream tour.” Absolut Vodka implies that it is the most definitive and, well, absolute dream you can have. And Honda says that its automobiles are what will power your dreams. But hear this: those kinds of ads lie to us. Now, there’s nothing wrong with enjoying a certain car or a certain drink or planning travel for yourself and those you love. **But they are not the things that should ever power your dreams or mine.** No, we should take our cue from Joseph whose second dream was about **safety and protection for the vulnerable** when he fled Herod’s murderous intent. And so we too dream well when **our** dreams always include protection for the hurting and the marginal, safety for those whose lives are lived on the edge, defense of the defenseless, and care for those whom the world too often abrades and bashes on. To dream well is to have a heart for, as the Bible over and over again reminds us, the immigrant, the poor, the children who are victimized, the marginal, the “other” whose religion or gender or ethnicity or orientation or nationality makes them the target of too much hate. Joseph dreamed well because his dream was to protect and defend those whom he loved. And that is how we dream well too – committing ourselves in new ways to protect and defend those in this world whom God loves who are indeed hurting and powerless and in need of defenders. So: *dream well, dream*

well.

Joseph's final dream in the story is when the angel gives him the all-clear and tells him to return to Israel. What does this dream mean for him and what can it mean for us? Well, here's what strikes me about Joseph's dream. In following it he chose to say "yes" to novelty and new possibilities for his life and the life of those he loved. He could have stayed in Egypt, he could have played it safe. But he didn't. He accepted God's call to new possibilities. It would not always mean an easy life; and, in fact, it would have both exquisite joy and terrible pain. Yet God is always calling him and calling all of us at times to do new things, to move beyond what is safe, to take risks for the possibility of more joy, more purpose, than we imagined. Here's what one preacher says in this regard:

Where are your dreams and visions...? Is the unconscious voice of God whispering to you in your heart, in your sleep, in your feelings, in your hunches? What... restlessness... is stirring you up and echoing in your emptiness and bubbling within your fears and anxieties? ... How is God pushing you to give more life to the world?⁴

If you, like Joseph, would dream well, then indeed God is always calling you to offer, indeed, "more life to the world," God is calling to you sometimes to eschew the safe and seek, as Rev. Barbara Blaisdell has so aptly and pointedly put it, the promise and the purpose that God hopes and wants for your life. So, I would ask you: **IS** there something in your life that is indeed restless, unsatisfied, thinking there must be more, wanting to move beyond what you want and need to new ways to be a blessing to those

⁴<http://www.sermonsuite.com/freebk.php?i=26063&key=x6cvUylump0Fyxuf>

God has placed in your path? Then I again invite you: listen well for where God is calling, for God is indeed inviting you to *dream well, dream well*. May it be so! Amen.