

**JOSEPH'S DREAM**  
**Micah 5:1-5a**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, December 18, 2016**

On this last Sunday in Advent our scripture spotlights the most under rated player in the Christmas story, Joseph of Nazareth. According to both Matthew and Luke, Jesus wasn't Joseph's birth son, but according to Jewish tradition and law, adoption gave Jesus all the rights and privileges of a biological son. Joseph's ancestors automatically became Jesus' ancestors, making Jesus a bona fide descendant of the House of David, the reigning dynasty from King David. The last King of Israel was Zedekiah, who lost his throne when the Babylonians conquered Judea in 586 B.C., roughly six hundred years before Christ was born.

After that David's descendants continued to live on in reduced circumstances but always aware of their bloodline and their deep spiritual connection to the family's hometown, Bethlehem.

We don't know why or when, but at some point, Joseph's family migrated north to Nazareth in the province of Galilee. We know next to nothing about Joseph's family, except for the names of his male ancestors given in the genealogy tracing his ancestry back to King David, and then further still back to Abraham.

It's this lack of information that makes Matthew's narrative frustrating. He tells his story with as few words as possible, which may be why Matthew is really a master storyteller. Leaving out the details and nuances we moderns expect, Matthew forces us to read between the lines and fill in the blanks, which draws us deeper into the story of God becoming one of us, a flesh and blood human being, stepping out from eternity and into the time and place where we live.

Here's what I mean by having to read between the lines. Matthew, brief and to the point, tells us Joseph learned Mary was pregnant but Matthew doesn't say how Joseph found out so we can only speculate. We do know Joseph didn't go public and play the role of the wrong, jilted lover. Instead he kept the scandal under wraps and intended to quietly divorce Mary.

A modern day storyteller would be inclined to thrash out Joseph's angst and sense of betrayal, dismissing Mary's far fetched explanation out of hand, with accusations and name calling.

But Matthew doesn't do that.

Keep in mind this situation isn't about infidelity and betrayal, because Mary did nothing wrong. It's really about being able to believe the unbelievable and trust in God's plan.

After Joseph decided to quietly divorce Mary, did he have second thoughts? Remember Joseph took God seriously and like every Jew believed God would keep his promise and send the Messiah. Believing that to be true, Joseph knew when the Messiah was born he'd need father. Being a direct descendant of David, he had to know if he stayed with Mary and adopted her child the prophecies would be fulfilled.

These ruminations caused Joseph to have strange dreams bubbling up from his subconscious when he went to bed that night to a restless sleep.

Joseph heard the angel tell him to put aside his doubts and fears. Take Mary as your wife. She told you the truth...

Here's where our invitation to speculate really kicks in. Being a faithful Jew who knew the prophecies and waited and prepared for the Messiah's coming, it's possible Joseph half believed Mary's story, but was spooked by the awesome responsibilities he'd shoulder being the father of the Messiah. That would scare any of us.

Being post modern people, we've been taught to apply reason when making decisions about what's real and what's not, so our first impulse might be to question the validity of Joseph's dream. After all, how often do angels visit us with messages from God? Would you ever make a life-changing decision based on a dream? Even so, I submit wise and discerning people have experienced the mystery of God transcending science and reason allowing them to be open to the probability that God does communicate to us all the time, even in our dreams.

Coming to that conclusion, Joseph was well aware that he'd be branded for being unhinged if he went public with his dream so Joseph probably said nothing to nobody except Mary, who already knew it was all true.

Now after encouraging you to read between the lines of Matthew's short, concise narrative, doesn't this story you've heard hundreds of times start becoming more urgent and powerful? The story of Mary and Joseph stops being familiar and sentimental. Now they become courageous radical agents in God's plan to turn the world upside down and inside out.

Going rogue, Mary and Joseph knew their future together would not always be safe and comfortable. To stay faithful to their vocation to be the Messiah's parents, they needed to keep close to God, trusting each other and their son to God's protection and grace. What they needed, and God gave them was a growing sense of inner peace, plus the joy and affirmation that comes with it.

I once had a conversation with a young woman seriously considering adoption. On a road trip with her husband, she silently prayed, "Lord, give us a sign if you want us

to adopt a baby.” Minutes later she heard on the car radio, for the first time ever a public service announcement encouraging adoption. What’s more, she heard the same announcement repeated three more times in the space of an hour.

She asked for a sign and got one. A bolt of lightning couldn’t be more effective.

But then the doubts set in. Maybe this wasn’t a message from God, just a coincidence. You know what I’m talking about, God hits you on the head, bombards you with signs, messages and affirmations, even so, we tell ourselves, “...maybe I’m reading too much into things.” And so reason trumps faith and we stay the same.

My point: God always tries to get through to us, but we’re either not listening or we don’t want to hear. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, Joseph could’ve attributed his dream to an undigested piece of beef, divorce Mary and walk away. Likewise, Mary when faced with being a single parent could’ve gone for an abortion. If these things happened, there’d be no Christ Child and no salvation. Sounds drastic, but ask yourself, by not seeing God’s signs or God’s messages, has your life become less than it could be?

You see when you enter the Christmas story and allow the Holy Spirit to put you in Joseph’s and Mary’s shoes and wonder whether or not you’d accept similar responsibilities, life will never be the same again.

I believe that’s part of the reason why Luke and Matthew included the Christmas story in their gospels. Certainly they wanted us to know how and why Christ was born, but also to challenge us to receive the greatest gift ever given and then become this generation of players in the story of Christ coming into the world again and again to guarantee the story will never end.