

WPC  
Rev. Ken Sunoo  
December 19, 2010

The Dreamer  
Matthew 1:18-25

It was a few days before Christmas. A woman woke up one morning and told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" "Oh," her husband replied, "you'll know the day after tomorrow."

The next morning, she turned to her husband again and said the same thing, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And her husband said, "You'll know tomorrow."

On the third morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband, "I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" And he smiled back, "You'll know tonight."

That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted. She opened it gently. And when she did,

she found - a book! And the book's title was "The Meaning of Dreams."

(The Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler, Day 1, 12/23/07)

What have you been dreaming about lately? As we get closer to Christmas morning, I'm sure some of us are dreaming about wonderful possibilities. Whether of pearl necklaces or new bicycles... or even of all the good in the world our recent purchases at the Alternative Gift Fair could accomplish - homeless women given a decent night's sleep, hungry families around the world given a goat or a cow to provide milk to nourish growing children. How we long for those dreams to come true.

Today's gospel lesson is about a dream, the dream of Joseph. Not Mary's dream, but Joseph's dream. It's interesting that this Joseph, like his Old Testament counterpart with his technicolor dreamcoat, is a dreamer. We tend to be more familiar with the story of the angel Gabriel appearing to the Virgin Mary, but that story only appears in the gospel of Luke. Matthew's gospel instead depicts the nativity of Christ through the lens of Joseph, the man who was engaged to Mary.

Joseph dreamed something wonderful, astounding, and quite disturbing. God would be born to his virgin fiancée, as crazy as that sounded. Joseph had some serious trusting in God to do!

Tony Robinson says "The Virgin Birth," is a way of saying, "Impossible Possibility." It's intentionally jarring. Something like saying, "Light Night" or "Dry Rain." Anyhow, the point of "Virgin Birth" is to say what Luke says, "Humanly impossible; but with God all things are possible." The response is not certainty but wonder.<sup>1</sup>

As I said before, Joseph had some serious trusting in God to do. But Joseph had to trust someone else, too. Joseph had to trust Mary. Surely Joseph must have loved Mary. But, still, this took a lot of trust! "And this is why Joseph's dream is so important. Joseph dreamed of the salvation of the world." (The Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler, Day 1, 12/23/07)

For the most part, Joseph is "the Rodney Dangerfield of the Christmas story -"<sup>2</sup> he just gets no respect. He's easy to overlook. The church has historically focused on Mary and not on Joseph. There are no hymns dedicated to Joseph in our hymnal. Stained glass windows around the world feature Mary and the baby Jesus – Joseph, if he's in the picture at all, is always off to the side. Even Luke's Gospel barely mentions Joseph. Luke chooses to focus on Mary – on how Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, and how Mary responded with the memorable words of the *Magnificat*, "My soul magnifies the Lord..."

---

<sup>1</sup> Tony Robinson, Weekly Reading, Posted Dec. 13, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, Journal for Preachers, Advent 2007, 8.

But Matthew makes it clear that, although Joseph doesn't utter a single word in the Christmas story, he plays a central role in it. So what does Matthew tell us about Joseph?

First, we know that one of Joseph's functions is to link Jesus with the lineage of David. Notice how the angel addresses Joseph: "Joseph, *son of David*, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife..." Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, *the son of David*. He traces the family line down from Abraham to David to Joseph. "If the Messiah is to be born the son of David, then this is the man he must be born to."<sup>3</sup>

Second, Matthew records Joseph's "marital situation."<sup>4</sup> He tells us that Joseph and Mary are engaged but not yet living together. The Greek word that's translated "engaged" should more properly be translated "betrothed." Theodore J. Wardlaw notes: "Betrothal" in ancient Palestine meant more than "engagement" does in our time. Through "betrothal" a woman was "bound" to a man through formal words of consent.<sup>5</sup>

Betrothal was often arranged when the woman was still quite young, around twelve or thirteen years old. At this point, she was already viewed by society as the man's wife, and it could be years before the woman betrothed to the man moved out of her family's house and into the home of

---

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007, 8-9.

her husband. Joseph and Mary are between these two stages –between betrothal and marriage.

Next, Matthew tells us Joseph’s “moral situation.”<sup>6</sup> Joseph is a “righteous man,” which means that he’s utterly devoted to keeping the commandments of God. Here is where the problems start. Wardlaw says, “when Mary is found to be pregnant and Joseph knows he’s not the father, he knows from the Scout handbook of religious righteousness just what he has to do. According to the law – to which he’s righteously committed – he must turn her out or even put her to death. The problem for Joseph is that he’s both compassionate and righteous. Because he’s compassionate, he will quietly release Mary from the bonds of betrothal. But because he’s righteous, he will not ignore the law.”<sup>7</sup>

Martin B. Copenhaver says, “For Matthew, the heart of the story is about a just and good man who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked: his betrothed pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked, his dreams shattered in pieces all around him.”<sup>8</sup>

And in the midst of this crisis, Joseph faces a dilemma. The law clearly states that unfaithfulness is grounds for breaking off the engagement. After all, Joseph is a righteous man. But Joseph also knows the terrible cost

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007, 35.

of publicly divorcing Mary on the charge of infidelity. Either she would be killed, as the law prescribed (Deut. 22:13-30), or at the very least she would be disowned by her family and left to scratch out her living however she can, feeding herself and her illegitimate child on whatever she can beg or steal.

Joseph is a righteous man, and he will not ignore the law. Mary is to be dismissed. But he's also a compassionate man, so he's unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace and plans to dismiss her quietly. Walter Wangerin notes: "Evidently, one's rights do not define one's righteousness! Joseph's righteousness is tempered by mercy and love."<sup>9</sup>

It's at this point that the story takes a surprising turn. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and reveals to him that "what looks like a moral outrage is in fact, a holy disruption. The child in Mary's womb is not a violation of God's will, but an expression of it, a gift from the Holy Spirit."<sup>10</sup>

Barbara Brown Taylor points out that, according to Matthew, "the whole grand experiment hangs on what happens with Joseph. If Joseph believes the angel, everything is on. The story can continue. Mary will have a home and a family and her child will be born the son of David. But if Joseph does not believe, then everything grinds to a halt. If he wakes up

---

<sup>9</sup> Walter Wangerin, *Preparing for Jesus*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, 13.

from his dream, shakes his head, and goes on to the courthouse to file the divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever.”<sup>11</sup>

Jewish law reads, “If someone says, ‘this is my son,’ he is so attested.”<sup>12</sup> If Joseph chooses to claim the child, then legally he becomes the child’s father, whether or not he is biologically. The Christmas story has reached a critical point. Will Joseph claim the child or not? Will he believe the angel’s impossible message or will he stick with what has always made sense to him?

Taylor says that, “according to Matthew, Joseph’s belief is as crucial to the story as Mary’s womb. God and all the angels are on her side, but it takes both parents to give birth to this remarkable child: Mary to give him life, and Joseph to give him a name: Jesus, son of David, from whose house the Messiah shall come.”<sup>13</sup>

All of heaven must have been holding its breath waiting for this righteous man to make his decision. Joseph is faced with a mess he had absolutely nothing to do with, and he has every reason to walk away from it in search of a “cleaner, more controlled life with an easier, more conventional wife.”<sup>14</sup> But Joseph doesn’t do that. He decides to believe that

---

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 157.

God is somehow present in this mess. He claims the scandal for his own. “He owns the mess – he legitimates it – and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born.”<sup>15</sup>

Taylor notes that “Joseph is the one in the story who is most like us, presented day by day with circumstances beyond our control, with lives we would never have chosen for ourselves, tempted to divorce ourselves from it all when an angel whispers in our ears: ‘Do not fear. God is here. It may not be the life you had planned, but God may be born here too, if you will permit it.’”<sup>16</sup>

That “if” is the real shocker – “*if* you will permit it.” It’s a real mystery that God’s birth requires human partners “willing to believe the impossible, willing to claim the scandal, to adopt it and give it our names, accepting the whole sticky mess.”<sup>17</sup>

Of course, our individual lives are not the only ones that seem to be in such a mess. The whole world seems like one giant mess. Some days it may take the faith of Joseph to believe that, as Amy Grant puts it, “God is in us, God is for us, God is with us, Emmanuel.” But may it be so for us this Christmas, and every day. Amen.”

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*