

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

December 18, 2016

“Dream”

Advent 2016, part 4

Matthew 1:18-25

Only one week left until Christmas! For some people, that might sound like an alarm, but I am hoping for most of us, this season of Advent has helped you to slow down and consider what is really important. We have spent time together the last three weeks talking about how to prepare for Jesus, to make room in our lives for him. We are watching for his return. We are confessing and repenting of our sin. We are seeing the opportunities and people around us, inviting them to join together in this journey with us. I sincerely pray that your Christmas “Rush” is actually a Christmas “Hush” – and that you look forward to a Silent Night on Saturday. And don’t forget, there are plenty of invitations in the back of the sanctuary for you to invite your friends and neighbors to join us for that sacred celebration.

Would you pray with me? Holy Lord, you are the one whom heaven and earth adore. Make your presence real to us in this place. Show us how to open our hearts to receive your word. We want to know the real spirit of Christmas – your spirit. Help us to listen to the dreams you send us. To you, Jesus Christ, belong all praise, honor and glory, forever. Amen.

[Clip from The Matrix \(1999\) “Have you ever had a dream so real?”](#)

In 1999, the movie, “The Matrix” captured audiences with a fascinating tale of two worlds – the artificial-reality world, called “The Matrix,” which looked like our everyday life, and the real world, in which humans battled machines for survival. I believe the movie was popular because it touched a nerve with many

people. We are discontent with the world we live in, and we wish for a better reality.

In the movie, Morpheus famously asks Neo, “Have you ever had a dream so real...how would you tell the difference between the dream world and the real world?” What are dreams? Freud and other psychologists believed that they were “manifestations of the unconscious mind.” (Taylor Burton-Edwards, umcdiscipleship.org) Modern neuroscientists tell us that dreams are the side-effects of memory consolidation. Our brain literally files away the messages of the day – images, sounds, smells – and places them in long-term memory as more coherent stories. In the process, some parts of our brain that control our sensory inputs are reactivated, causing us to see these mini-movies of our memories. It is truly an amazing process. Dreams can help us to see connections in our activities that escaped our waking notice. They can seem very real.

But unlike Neo, we do differentiate dreams from reality. We may talk about dreams, analyze them, wonder about them, but they remain just that: dreams. And so we are not likely to act upon those dreams. But what if the dream is from God? Can God’s dreams change our lives? That’s what I want to focus on today.

We just read about Joseph and his life-changing dream in our scripture. Poor Joseph doesn’t get much emphasis in the Christmas Story. There are not many carols written about him. Jesus, Mary, the angels, the shepherds, and the wise men get all the credit. Even the animals, who aren’t actually mentioned in the Bible, get songs! “The cattle are lowing.” The Friendly Beasts. Joseph seems to be relegated to a small role, always named beside (and after) Mary.

But Joseph is critical to the story of Christmas. In fact, Joseph is the one through whom Jesus gets his royal lineage, because he is a descendent of King David. God needed Joseph to complete the story by becoming Jesus' adoptive father. And this adoption almost didn't happen.

Joseph was reluctant to take Mary as his wife when he found out that she was pregnant. To understand this, we need to know a little about 1st-century marriage. There were actually three parts to it: the arrangement, the engagement or betrothal, and finally, the wedding ceremony. The arrangement might have occurred while the couple were still children. Then when they were old enough to be married, they entered a betrothal period that was legally binding and might last for one year. Although they were pledged to each other, they did not live together or sleep together. And because it was legally binding, the betrothal could only be broken by divorce or death.

It was very different from today. There were no marriage counselors, no Dr. Phil. Let's face it, our culture glamorizes pre-marital sex. Over 50% of children in the USA are born to single women. And about 50% of marriages end in divorce. To us, Mary's pregnancy is rather routine. But not so in ancient Palestine. In Joseph's community, marital unfaithfulness was punishable by stoning. (See John 8). And sadly, women bore the burden of proof in their patriarchal society.

The Bible says Joseph was righteous (Matt. 1:19a), which means he knew God's law and lived by it. He had read of the punishment of stoning in Deuteronomy 22:23-24. But Joseph also knew of God's mercy and compassion. I think Joseph truly loved Mary, because the scripture says "he did not want to expose her to public disgrace." (Matt. 1:19b) He wanted to save her life.

Joseph thought it over. No other explanation occurred to him. Mary must have cheated on him. So he was prepared to sacrifice his own reputation to let her go away quietly.

Go where? I have no idea. That would mean she would have to lie about her past and say her husband died. It wasn't a great option, but it was the best and most merciful Joseph could think of.

Joseph's mind was made up. And then he dreamed. And in this strange, vivid dream, an angel spoke to him.

Angels are messengers of God. They are not to be confused with Cherubim and Seraphim – winged creatures we often hear of in visions. Angels in the Bible show up in human form, and represent God's presence and voice.

The angel basically says to Joseph, "Don't abandon her. She's pregnant through a miracle, not another man. She has not betrayed you." He goes on to say that Jesus will "save his people from their sins." (Matt. 1:21)

Joseph awakens to new possibilities he hadn't considered before his dream. He chooses to be obedient to the dream God had for him, rather than follow the common-sense, dead-end reality his culture taught him.

This is really strange, when you think about it. I know that dreams can be vivid and memorable. But who would ever act on a dream that contradicts common sense? That takes incredible faith!

Joseph chose to listen to the angel in his dream. He let his dream influence him, change his choice, and change his life, and our lives, forever. To Joseph, his dream wasn't just a dream. It was his mandate. His dream overrode his personal experience and common sense.

Joseph was still righteous. He was still good. But instead of acting on what people said he should do, he acted on what God said he should do. He trusted God. He had confidence in God's will for his life, for Mary's life, and for the baby Jesus' life.

Just imagine how he woke up the morning after the dream. Energized. Bewildered. Believing. Trusting. Transformed.

There is something about Joseph's decision to follow his dream that we need to understand. He did this at great personal risk. His reputation was at stake. His livelihood. His faith in God. But I believe he was more awake, more alive, after he chose to listen to God and take Mary as his wife and Jesus as his son.

Rev. Dawn Chessar has this to say about Joseph's decision: "Maybe a part of being awakened is the willingness to act on a dream, believe in a dream, and trust that something that seems like it can't be real, is actually real after all: Like the dream that this baby, born in a stable in Bethlehem, really is Emmanuel, God with us. Like the dream of the kind of world that Jesus came to make manifest in this world, really can be a reality for all of God's children." (D.C.)

There are things beyond what we can see. And God does have answers to send to us. We see these dreams in others, if we look. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. His famous speech, "I Have a Dream," outlined a world that was not a present reality. But he was a man who acted on his dream to make it a reality. And because of his courage, his dream became a reality for others, too.

Jesus' birth is not a distant memory or a dream. He is very real. Christmas is not just an excuse to drink eggnog and sing songs we haven't heard all year. It's a chance to enter into the dream that God has for saving the world.

This is our awakening story. We can now ask ourselves, what is possible with God? What is possible with Emmanuel, God with us? We dare not sleepwalk through this holiday season. We need to dream what Christmas made possible for all of us. And, like Joseph, we need to act.

Joseph risked much to act on God's dream. My question for you today is, what are you willing to risk? Would you move to a different country? Would you give up your priorities to make God a priority in your life? Would you sacrifice your time, your prayers, your presence, and your talents to make this good news known to the world?

I dream of what this church could be. I dare to dream of new possibilities, and not be swayed by a cold, hard, pessimistic worldview. I dare to see hope in unusual circumstances. I dream of a church that changes the world. I dream of a Christmas Eve full of people because we went out and invited them. I dream of small groups and youth groups and prayer groups and bowls of soup. But I'm not content to just dream. And you shouldn't, either. Be like Joseph. Act on that dream like you want it to be real. Pray to God that he provides the resources to make that dream come alive.

Two thousand years ago, because Joseph dreamed and then acted on his dream, the Savior was born in Bethlehem. What impact will our dreams have on the world if we do "what the angel of the Lord commands"?

Memory verse

Joel 2:28 - "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."

Reflection questions

1. What dreams have you had that were especially vivid?

2. What decisions have you faced in life that required both justice and mercy?
3. What challenges do you think the holy family faced because of the virgin birth?
4. What vision does God have for your life? Your family? Your church?
5. What are you willing to sacrifice to be obedient to God's dream? Your time?
Your finances? Your career? How will you do this?