

Led by God-Given Dreams

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Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
2005

December 25,

Christmas is way too short. No sooner is the Christ born than Herod the Great, who is afraid of children, starts up the same old garbage of killing babies for national security reasons. Not even babies, and perhaps especially not babies, are safe in this world.

The world is a dangerous place and so our Christmas celebrations are colored with not only Christmas carols, laughter, gifts and banquets, but also with war chants, starvation, illness and death. From our beginnings we are in danger. Only a healthy trust in the God of Christmas and beyond can save us.

I think one of the underrated ways in which God saves us is through our dreams of sleep. Most of us just ignore most of our dreams but every so often there is one so vivid, so real, so powerful that we pay attention. In Matthews Gospel Joseph has four such dreams; two of guidance toward purpose, and two of impending danger. Three of those dreams are in today's lesson. The fourth dream actually precedes today's text and is reported in Matthew's first chapter:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When Jesus' 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. ... 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."¹

What made it possible for Joseph to marry Mary was a God given dream which Joseph recognized as from God to which he responded with faith and action. Joseph has, over the centuries, been a great model of faith. Joseph believed that God would be true to each new dream. If this had not been so he would have stuck with his original plan and put Mary and her baby quietly aside and lived a quiet and respectable life. But instead of running from God's dangerous dream, Joseph believed

¹ Matthew 1:18-21,24-25

and acted in trust that this dream was from God and that no matter what happened, God would be true to the dream if he, Joseph, would be true to God's purpose for him.

That dreams can contain important and even divine information for us is now commonly recognized. Carl G. Jung, a contemporary of Freud, thought of dreams as one of the primary ways in which our deep unconscious and our connection with God speak to us. He called dreams "compensatory," meaning that they tell us things that supplement what we already know but may have not fully understood.

For instance, a dream might tell us that we have seen a situation incorrectly and give us a new perspective upon which to act. Joseph's dream tells him that Mary, though she is obviously pregnant with someone else's baby, is still worth having as a wife because she is a godly woman and her child will be a godly child. And though the child is an embarrassment and humiliation, it is still a God given child with a God given purpose for the salvation of the world. And so in a dream Joseph has come to know Mary and her baby's goodness, God's purpose in them, and Joseph's own purpose in caring for them.

Or a dream may warn us of a danger we might not have previously considered. That Herod is crazy and dangerous is obvious. Even his own family was not safe from his fears. Herod had one of his wives and three of his sons imprisoned and then executed when he thought they might be after his throne. But that Herod would be interested in killing Jesus, as his dream warns him, is something that Joseph had not previously considered and seeing the danger forecast in his dream he wisely takes Mary and the baby to Egypt and away from Herod's madness.

And dreams can tell us when and where it is safe for us to be. After some time, probably not a very long time at all since Herod dies right around the time that Jesus is born, Joseph has his third dream. This dream sends Joseph and his little family right back into the thick of things, but still at a safe distance in Nazareth, 100 miles north of Jerusalem where Herod's son Archealus had now assumed his father's throne. Archealus was just as vicious and power hungry as his father, having tried to murder his two surviving brothers.

Joseph's dreams continually led him in and out of danger. Only his consistent decision to trust God to guide him and bring him through the danger made it possible for God to work salvation for the world in Joseph and his family.

To dream God given dreams is to be led away from danger, to safety, and to be given purpose. Those who trust that God is working for good, even in the midst of great danger, even when the situation seems absolutely hopeless and even foolish, even in them, are a part of what God does to save the world.

I was struck by how dreams, especially dreams that become

shared dreams, shape the world while reading Doris Goodwin's biography of Eleanor and FDR, entitled No Ordinary Time. In the early and darkest of days of World War II Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill carried a common dream and repeatedly acted in faith. Roosevelt and Churchill believed that no matter the news from the front, there was a God dreamed destiny in which democracy would not only win, but would grow for all peoples. It was a dream of salvation for not just their nations, but for a united nations.

In No Ordinary Time Doris Goodwin tells of a particularly dangerous time when their dream was sorely tested:

(Churchill and Roosevelt) had just settled down (to work) when a secretary handed the president a telegram. It contained the devastating news that on June 21 (1942) the British garrison at Tobruk in Libya had surrendered to the Germans, with twenty-five thousand British soldiers taken prisoner. The president handed the telegram to Churchill without a word. "It was a bitter moment" Churchill conceded. For thirty-three weeks, Tobruk had withstood the German siege; now a garrison of twenty-five thousand had laid down their arms to perhaps one-half that number of Germans. "Defeat is one thing," Churchill wrote; "disgrace is another."

There was a moment of silence, and then Roosevelt turned to Churchill. "What can we do to help?" "Give us as many Sherman tanks as you can spare, and ship them to the Middle East as quickly as possible," Churchill replied. The president sent for General Marshall, and within days three hundred tanks and one hundred self-propelled guns were on their way to the Eighth Army in Alexandria. When Eleanor joined her husband and the prime minister at lunch, she was amazed at the spirits of the two men. Though they were obviously stricken by the news, their first reaction was to figure out what could be done. "To neither of those men," she marveled, "was there such a thing as not being able to meet a new situation. I never heard either of them say that ultimately we would not win the war. This attitude was contagious, and no one around either of them would ever have dared to say, 'I'm afraid.'"²

And today we now know how right their faith was. Against the probable the Allies won the war, Europe was rebuilt, and democracy moved into nations that were totalitarian. The dream, just as Joseph's dream, is not yet complete and has many dangerous times ahead, but still, great dreams believed in and acted on have great power to become real.

I am also reminded of a United Methodist church that was dreamed for the Cottage Lake area. I don't know who first had

² Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994), 374f

the dream; it may have come to several different folks at the same time. The dream was an impossible dream since it envisioned sufficient funds to pay a pastor and program staff before there was a congregation, and it envisioned ultimately developing a program size congregation with multiple staff and at least 200 in worship and hoped for 400 in worship where now there was no one. Such a project had never been done.

Yet in 1991 people of faith prayed, argued and begged for funds and people. A pastor was hired from Illinois. A congregation of 12 was gathered in a living room. Phone calls, mailings, personal invitations were given to the first worship at Laura Engle Wilder's School and 300 folks were there.

The early congregation was committed to a rhythm of worship, study and mission. This commitment created the unusual schedule we have of worship at 9:30 and study at 11:00 because the congregation believed it would encourage folks to stay around for a class, especially if they had children.

The congregation grew to an average worship size of 206 in 1999 and then for various reasons there were hard times and the worship and study size declined. But the dream, a dream I believe to be from God, survives and now this congregation is recapturing that original dream. Many have made sacrifices for the original and the ongoing dream. And now this dream is again reaching out to the community with the good news of God through worship, study and service. In the last year we have begun to see increases in worship attendance, study participation and mission activity.

The dream God gave for this congregation may have been on hard times for awhile, but no God given dream is ever permanently lost. And this congregation, once an impossible dream and then a struggling dream, has become a significant part of God's healing salvation for the world.

Every life has a God given dream or dreams, some kind of God instilled purpose. Dreams may be as simple and humble as Joseph caring for another's baby and making it his own; or as complex as nations at war; or they may be as humble as guiding congregations into being. But simple or complex, God given dreams change the world toward compassion and justice. God given dreams lead through danger and conflict to healing and salvation, if we will but trust that when God gives us a dream, God stays with us helping us make the dream come true.

Amen and Shalom.