

Advent 4 A
Matthew 1:18-25
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Joseph's Dream, Our Dreams
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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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

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Last week, we took a look at Mary's revolutionary Christmas dream for the world that *could* be—would be. Today, we're going to take a look at Joseph's dream. The funny thing about Joseph's dream is that it was an actual dream—the kind you have when you're asleep!

Before we get to that dream, let's talk about Joseph's *other* dream. This is the dream where boy meets girl, enters into a legally binding betrothal contract for what the boy thinks is undoubtedly too long to wait, and finally they celebrate their union with family and friends, move in

together, and consummate their marriage. I think it's safe to say this was Joseph's first-century dream.

Mary's news about an unplanned pregnancy shattered that dream. Joe had two choices, a public stoning for Mary instead of a bridal shower, or a quiet divorce. He planned to execute the latter. The Joseph of Matthew's gospel is stoic, pragmatic, and, despite this shocking news, incredibly level-headed, even protective toward Mary, despite her "condition". However, another account of these events tells the story of a slightly more relatable Joseph. This account comes from the Second—Century Protoevangelium of James.

[When Joseph] discovered that [Mary] was big with child . . . he smote his face, and threw himself on the ground upon the sackcloth, and wept bitterly, saying: With what face shall I look upon the Lord my God? and what prayer shall I make about this maiden? because I received her a virgin out of the temple of the Lord, and I have not watched over her. Who is it that has hunted me down? Who has done this evil thing in my house, and defiled the virgin? Has not the history of Adam been repeated in me? For just as Adam was in the hour of his singing praise, and the serpent came, and found Eve alone, and completely deceived her, so it has happened to me also . . . And Joseph was greatly afraid, and retired from her, and considered what he should do in regard to her.

Regardless of which account we hold to be accurate, Joseph's next step was to do what men so often do when facing life and death decisions, he went to sleep. And that's when the second dream—the *actual* dream happened.

Matthew tells us that an angel appeared to Joseph in that dream and assured him that Mary's child was special, to go ahead with the marriage, and to name the baby Jesus. Through *this* dream, Joseph got a new dream—a dream of him and Mary, married, with a child who would be called Emmanuel—God with us. Sometimes, our dreams change.

When I was very young, I dreamed of becoming a wildly successful lawyer, living in a grand Victorian house with a library, having an Irish Setter, two children, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, no wife. No doubt Mary had dreams of her own that changed with the unexpected child in her womb; morphed into a hopeful vision of empires toppled and her people liberated; and transformed again and again as the child was born, grew, taught, ministered, stirred up trouble, and eventually got himself killed. Joseph's dreams changed that day, Matthew tells us. He would survive the change. Sometimes, as we all know, our dreams *need* to change.

Notice the first words the angel says to Joseph in that sleeping dream: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid." I imagine that he was afraid. His whole world had changed. His dream had to change too. Like Joseph, sometimes fear gets in the way of dreaming a new dream. Sometimes, our fear—of what others might think, of all the challenges we'll face along the way, of what it will cost us—our fear gets in the way of us dreaming at all. But the truth is, we all need a dream. It doesn't matter how old we are or how much we've already achieved or how little we've already achieved. We always need a dream—something to get us out of bed in the morning, to work toward, to attain to. We are the ones who will make our dreams come true, but we need to have dreams in the first place.

Advent is a time for dreaming. The very air we breathe seems pregnant with possibility and we catch glimpses of heaven breaking into the everyday: of renewed generosity, shinier stars, brighter smiles, warmer handshakes—of hope, peace, joy, and love. Advent is a time for dreaming. Mary had a dream. Joseph had a dream. You and I—we each have dreams too. Sometimes those dreams need to change, but that's no reason to stop dreaming. Or never to start.

So, dream your dream this season—and may the hope, peace, joy, and love of Advent sustain us as we seek to make those dreams a reality. Amen.