Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Advent 4A
Peace, Seattle
December 22, 2013
Isaiah 7, Matthew 1:18-25

BRINGING THE DREAM TO BIRTH

Over the past three weeks, we've compared the prophet Isaiah to an artist who uses great strokes to put bold colors on a large canvass; colors that trace the height, depth, and breadth of God's dream for the world.

On this final Sunday of Advent those broad strokes become pointed and specific, and we see how two passages—Isaiah 7 & Matthew 1—though centuries apart—are inextricably bound together by a name that has become synonymous with this season: EMMANUEL.

Indeed, as our opening hymn makes clear, at the core of this season is the longing we feel in many directions at once as we wait for the appearance of the promised one; the one whom the prophets call *"Root of Jesse," "Wisdom from on High," "Lord of Might," "Key of David," "Dayspring," "Cornerstone," "GOD-WITH-US."*[1]

As always, when we open the Scriptures, we enter a room in which a conversation has been going on a long time. Today, that conversation in Isaiah is about where you put your trust.

Here's the situation…
King Ahaz is in trouble. Neighboring kings to the north want him to join their alliance against superpower Assyria. But Ahaz declines, convinced that—even united—they don't stand a chance against the world's most powerful army.

Disappointed, his neighbors threaten to attack Ahaz and this threat has him shaking in his boots.

Enter the prophet Isaiah. ASK FOR A SIGN—AS BIG AS YOU WANT, he tells Ahaz.
Ahaz refuses; but he gets one any way.

> LOOK, THE YOUNG WOMAN IS WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON,
> AND SHALL NAME HIM IMMANUEL…BEFORE THE CHILD KNOWS HOW TO REFUSE THE EVIL AND CHOOSE THE GOOD, THE LAND BEFORE WHOSE TWO KINGS YOU ARE IN DREAD WILL BE DESERTED.

This child, a visible sign of God's presence, is meant to inspire trust. But for Ahaz, it never does.

Eventually, he himself falls into alliance with Assyria, and in the process, gives up the most precious thing of all—fidelity to God.

Fast forward seven centuries to a guy named JOE, a small town carpenter, newly engaged, whose only claim to fame is his distant kinship to King David. He also is asked to place his trust in the God who is with us. Let's see if it works this time.

Funny thing about Joseph…you won't find him in Mark's gospel. He's only a footnote in John's. In the birth story in Luke Joseph takes a back seat. He's off in the shadows, while young Mary along with her cousin Elizabeth are at center stage.

[1] *Wisdom from on High*: Proverbs 8:22f; *Lord of Might*: Exodus 3:2f; *Branch/Root of Jesse:* Isaiah 11:1, 53:2; *Key of David:* Isaiah 22:22; *Dayspring/Dawn*: Isaiah 9:1, Malachi 3:20; *Cornerstone*: Isaiah 28:16; *Emmanuel*: Isaiah 7:14.

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

In Luke's gospel it's Mary who has the visions, Mary who dreams the dreams, Mary who sings the song, the Magnificat, with some of the most powerful and treasured lyrics of all time. While Joseph, steady, unassuming Joseph, stands quietly off-stage, awaiting the cues for his brief appearances.

What we see and hear about Joseph in the first two chapters of Matthew, is just about all there is to know about the man, about his role in God's dream.

And so we have to do some reading between the lines to fully appreciate the situation in which Joseph finds himself.

The second sentence of our text speaks volumes:

> WHEN HIS MOTHER MARY HAD BEEN ENGAGED TO JOSEPH, BUT BEFORE THEY LIVED TOGETHER, SHE WAS FOUND TO BE WITH CHILD...

Joseph's fiancé, to put it bluntly, is pregnant.

Now, in the culture of that time, the fact that she was pregnant wouldn't necessarily be all that bad. They were engaged, after all, and in that day and time, engagement had more gravity and more commitment attached to it than it does today, for certain.

But that isn't the problem here. The problem here is that Joseph isn't the father.
And if Joseph isn't the father who is?!?

This is Mary's problem. This is her family's problem. This is Joseph's problem. This is his family's problem. In fact, you could say, the problem is the type that, before the drama is over, is going to touch the lives of lots of people in the small town of Nazareth.

Whatever dream Joseph may have had when Mary said YES to marriage, had turned into a nightmare.

Matthew goes on:

> HER HUSBAND JOSEPH, BEING A RIGHTEOUS MAN AND UNWILLING TO EXPOSE HER TO PUBLIC DISGRACE, PLANNED TO DISMISS HER QUIETLY.

Joseph had thought about the situation. Turned it over again and again. Agonized about it. Until finally he'd decided what he had to do. Joseph must have been deeply wounded by what was happening. Who wouldn't be? Yet he still cared for Mary.

As a man of honor he could not go through with the wedding.
But as a man of compassion he would not publicly shame her.
He would quietly, unobtrusively call off the engagement.

Now, the right was his to do a lot more than that! He was entitled under the law to a full public disclosure. He could wash his hands of Mary, and send her back to her family in disgrace, or even worse, could demand the full weight of the law, which would lead to her being stoned for her unfaithful act.

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

But he loved her; and though this love for her had suddenly become much more complicated in the light of her revelation, he knew what the right course was. He knew what he had to do.

But then, Joseph had a dream. Joseph had a dream. And that dream changed everything.

Do you believe in the power of dreams? Do you believe in the possibility that God may be speaking to you through your dreams?

- Some of us relate strange or vivid dreaming to a case of indigestion; what we ate for dinner last night didn't agree with us.
- Others of us claim that we simply don't have a dream life, period.
- Still others of us here this morning have had dreams in our lives that have deeply moved us. Dreams which have stuck with us, which are still vivid in our memories, even though they may have happened years ago.

Remember the school dream?—The one where the year is ending, and you discover that the whole time you've been missing a class, and now it's time to take the final exam?

It's a dream many people have, and it probably has to do with the level of stress in one's life. The dream portrays that stress and anxiety in clear, unmistakable terms. That's one kind of dream.

There is another kind of dreaming that happens for people.
A dreaming in which the dreamer awakes feeling that something profound, something deeply significant has been communicated; a life-altering message has been given and received.

The dreams recorded in Scripture are these kinds of dreams. They're the ones that have been remembered. The ones whose meaning has deepened over time, in their telling.

Joseph had a dream. The steady, faithful, quiet, unassuming carpenter, the fellow who found himself caught up in a story that had turned from sublime to sour; this Joseph had a dream.

And through this dream God approaches Joseph with the profound message of a divine role in the life of the child growing in Mary's womb. Speaking to him through a messenger, God says:

> **Do not be afraid to take Mary as you wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, the child within her is Emmanuel.**

That single dream left a powerful impression on Joseph. That dream had its origin in the ancient prophetic word. It came to him, like the dreams of his aged namesake, from God's creative hand.

When Joseph awoke, he didn't say much, but his actions speak volumes.

And this is the point upon which Matthew's story turns. This is the point where we begin to understand, along with Joseph, that what's playing out here in Nazareth and in Bethlehem isn't simply Joseph's story or Mary's story, it's God's story, God's dream.

God set the story in motion centuries before—some would say all the way back to the beginning—and Joseph was now part of it: a chosen instrument in God's plan to rescue and redeem the world.

But this mysterious plan, and God's mysterious methods, we learn, are not always wrapped in sweetness and light. Tending to this chapter of the story carefully helps us see that.

Sermon copyright © 2013 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

God's ways of being with us are not passive or placid—more likely, they're disruptive!
God is with us in ways we don't expect—ways we could do without, thank you very much!

When God is with us what was settled becomes unsettled. Life gets complicated.
God's intrusions cause consternation and difficulties; the path forks. Choices have to be made.

When Joseph awoke, he did as the messenger of the Lord said. He took Mary as his wife. He became her protector and provider, the legitimizer for Mary and her son. He gave the child his name.

In daring to believe his dream, in allowing himself to be convinced of its power, in risking his present and his future, Joseph becomes a sign of God with us. And he helps to prepare the way for the greatest gift of all—the infant Jesus, who comes to save.

Joseph trusted God's dream. And how about you?