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Advent 4A
December 22, 2019
Matthew 1:18-25

OF DREAMS AND DREAMING

THE DREAM made its appearance at a time when my life was turning upside down and the future was shrouded in fog.

In the dream it was late at night, and I was driving alone on a narrow mountain road in the middle of a blinding snowstorm. Unable to see, I had no choice but to stop.

Unable to move forward, unable to turn back, I was stuck.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a snowplow appeared from behind, and swinging around in front of me it began plowing the road ahead.

Falling in behind the plow I let go of the steering wheel and I allowed myself to be carried along—I knew not how...

A deep sense of well-being came over me. I knew that as long as I stayed behind that plow all would be well. I kept my hands off the wheel and laid back until, finally, we arrived at the destination.

Most dreams fade away at morning light. This one has stuck with me for decades.
I took it as an invitation to trust; to put my faith in a power greater than myself who would plow a path through this treacherous storm and deliver me, whole, to the other side.

Carl Jung, the pioneering Swiss psychiatrist of a century ago who unearthed new concepts for understanding and exploring the human psyche, called the dream "the small hidden door in the deepest and most intimate sanctum of the soul."

One of Jung's greatest contributions was helping us see that on the other side of this "small hidden door" lay the collective unconscious, brimming with symbols, wisdom, myths, and insights that connect human beings to one another and to the realm of the sacred; the voice of God.

Jung wrote:

> "Christians often ask why God does not speak to them, as he is believed to have done in former days. When I hear such questions, it always makes me think of the Rabbi who was asked:
>
> *How it could be that God often showed himself to people in the olden days but that nowadays one no longer [sees] him?*
>
> **The Rabbi replied: 'Nor is there anyone nowadays who could stoop so low.'**
>
> This answer hits the nail on the head. We are so captivated by and entangled in our subjective consciousness that we have simply forgotten the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions." [1]

[1]The fuller quotation: "I know that the Buddhists would say, as indeed they do: if only people would follow the noble eightfold path of the Dharma (doctrine, law) and had true insight into the Self; or the Christians: if only people had the right faith in the Lord; or the rationalist: if people could only be intelligent and reasonable—then all problems would be manageable and solvable. The trouble is that none of them manages to solve these problems himself. Christians often ask why God does not speak to them, as he is believed to have done in former days. When I hear such questions, it always makes me think of the Rabbi who was asked: how it could be that God often showed himself to people in the olden days but that nowadays one no longer saw him. The Rabbi replied: "Nor is there anyone nowadays who could stoop so low." This answer hits the nail on the head. We are so captivated by and entangled in our subjective consciousness that we have simply forgotten the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions." Carl Jung, CW18, Paras 600-601

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Today we meet Joseph—a man who has cultivated the ability to listen to his dreams.
And like his namesake—his great-great-great-great uncle Joseph, son of Jacob—he's learned to trust in the Voice that speaks to him from the other side.

Now in the birth story according to LUKE, Joseph takes a back seat. He's off in the shadows, while young Mary and her cousin Elizabeth hold center stage.

In Luke it's Mary who has the visions, Mary who dreams the dreams, Mary who sings the song, while Joseph stands quietly off-stage, awaiting the cues for his brief appearances.

But this morning we have MATTHEW'S gospel before us, and from Matthew we learn much more about Joseph and his role in God's unfolding drama.

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 fiancée is pregnant.

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

That isn't the problem here. The problem is that Joseph isn't the father. And if Joseph isn't, 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.

Matthew goes on:

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

Matthew takes us inside Joseph's process of discerning what he ought to do. He calls Joseph a "righteous man," willing to go the extra mile; unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace.

In a Middle Eastern culture embedded with notions of honor and shame, that's saying something.

Throughout the Middle East and South Asia even today one hears of fathers who undertake to preserve their family's honor by punishing daughters for real, assumed, or rumored transgressions.

If a woman or girl in these places is accused or suspected of engaging in behavior that could taint her family's status, she can face brutal retaliation from relatives, retaliation that can result in violent death.

The United Nations estimates that 5,000 women and girls are murdered each year in so-called "honor killings" by members of their own families.[2]

[2] See United Nations report: http://dmunc.org/wp-content/uploads/UN-Women-Topic-Guide-Final-Formatted.pdf

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In the culture in which Joseph and Mary were raised the penalty for adultery was death by stoning.

Though his relationship to her had become much more complicated in the light of her revelation, Joseph wasn't going to go the route of revenge. He'd call off the engagement, but he'd do it quietly.

And it's at that moment when Joseph has made up his mind that something unexpected happens:

Joseph has a dream. And this dream is an invitation to trust that a power greater than himself is involved here.

Joseph has a dream. And in this dream he learns that the Holy Spirit is behind the life that grows in Mary's womb.

How could a dream do this?

In his book, Dreams: A Way to Listen to God, Morton Kelsey writes:

> If it is absurd to believe that human beings can be reached and touched by the dynamism that lies at the heart of the universe, then dreams have little or no religious meaning. Then dreams may be at most a help in unraveling the tangled web of one's personal life, but they have little or no meaning beyond this.
>
> If, however, [we can be] open to another dimension of reality, then the dream may be one of the most common avenues through which God reaches out to us. Then dreams should be taken very seriously.

When Joseph wakes up he doesn'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, with Joseph, that what's playing out in Nazareth—what will play out in Bethlehem—isn't simply Joseph's story, it's God's story; God's plan set in motion with Joseph as a chosen instrument to pave the way for Emmanuel.

Joseph takes Mary as his wife and becomes her protector, provider, the legitimizer for Mary and her son. It is he who gives the child his name—JESUS.

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 his story helps us see how you and I could very well be next in line to receive a vision, to dream a dream; to take a leap of faith and find ourselves in the service of the divine; preparing the way for LOVE to be born today.

Amen.