

4th Sunday of Advent, 2016(A)

We come today to the heart of the greatest story ever told from human lips or heard by human ears. In a little over a week, we will gather again on the eve of the Feast of Christmas to celebrate the birth of a child who, more than any other life that ever walked planet earth, changed the course of human history on every continent, in every time and for all time. This story—anticipated long ago by the prophets—now takes on flesh in the womb of a peasant girl in the tiny hamlet of Nazareth in northern Israel. It is a story about a couple in love, a couple expecting a God-child that will not only impact their own lives but the rest of humanity as well.

In today's Gospel, Matthew tells us how this came about. His account is totally different from that of Luke. The only thing in common with both accounts are the central ideas that:

Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Joseph and Mary are the parents of Jesus.

In both accounts there is an angelic appearance: in one case to Mary and in the other to Joseph. Mary is told—in Luke's gospel—that she is to bear a son. When she says that she is still a virgin, she is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and her child will be the Son of God. In Joseph's case, he is told—in Matthew's gospel—not to be afraid to take Mary home as his wife because the child with whom she is pregnant is from the Spirit of God. The stories are different, but the central message is the same: Mary is the Mother of the Child, but Joseph is not the Father.

We need to recall that Jewish weddings involved three stages. To begin with, there was the engagement. This was often prearranged by the

parents or a matchmaker while the couple were still young children. They were not primarily unions of love, as we expect today; rather, the main object was procreation and the continuing of the family line. And so we see in the Old Testament times how cursed women felt who were not able to bear sons for their husband and his family line. Love might or might not come later, but such was of secondary importance.

Then later came the betrothal. This was a legally binding relationship lasting for one year. During this period the couple lived apart and had no sexual relations. If either party did not want to go through with the marriage at this stage, there had to be a divorce. And the penalty for having sexual relations with a betrothed virgin was stoning to death for both the man and woman.

And the third stage was the marriage itself.

We can see then Joseph's serious dilemma, not to mention his feelings of shock, betrayal and hurt, when he found that his betrothed was already pregnant and not by him. It seemed an open and shut case of adultery. On the other hand, try to imagine the feelings of Mary herself in this position! How was she to explain that she was pregnant by the power of God? Who would believe a story like that? If Joseph felt outraged and betrayed, one could certainly understand his feelings. Most men would have planned vengeance at such an insult to their manhood and the perceived possibility of becoming the laughing stock of the other men in the village.

But Joseph was not an ordinary man. By Mosaic Law, he had to divorce Mary; this was his duty and he planned to do so...but gently. Compassion for his bride-to-be led him to want to break off the engagement quietly.

But before this happened, an angel appears to him, telling him to go through with the marriage. He is told that the child has been conceived by the power of God's Spirit. No other man is involved. And since Joseph was a descendant of King David, Jesus will be called "Son of David" later on in the gospel.

And this incredible story unfolded by way of dreams. We might ask ourselves what was the strangest dream that I have ever had? Most of our dreams have no basis in reality, but for me, I have had a reoccurring dream that I had been thrown out of the Dominicans before I was ordained. Happily, this dream did not follow reality. When I was voted upon for Solemn Vows, there were 18 white beans for me and 4 black beans against allowing me to continue onto the priesthood. Those 4 black beans didn't disturb me all that much because there were easily that many nut cases in the seminary community—at least, that is how I choose to reflect upon those 4 individuals who obviously lacked insight into my outstanding character. I have now been a Dominican for 52 years and have had wonderful assignments, but I have to say that my time here at St. John the Baptist is at the top of that list.

Dreams. What is with these narratives that play out in our minds while we sleep? Sleep experts tell us that we dream when we are in deeper levels of sleep and although we usually only remember the last dream before waking, if we recall it at all, but we actually have as many as 10-15 dreams over the course of a night's sleep.

This much we know: dreams can be scary, exhausting, romantic or whimsical and their connection to our conscious daytime lives is often very slender indeed. But of course, there are some dreams that spill over into our daytime lives, connecting us to our deepest longings and helping us to summon our greatest courage. In this regard, we might think of Martin Luther King Jr. who famously spoke of his dream for the

future, when he dreamed that people would be judged by their character rather than the color of their skin.

As long as humans have slept, they have dreamed. And way before anyone conducted sleep studies or psychological examinations, our ancient forebears considered dreams to be a potential portal into an unseen world, the realm of gods and angels. And so in the writings of the Bible, we often find that the characters in the story believe that they hear God speaking to them, guiding them, through their dreams. Abram had these types of dreams, as did Jacob, Joseph, Gideon, Eli and many others. And so when we read in our gospel lesson today that God spoke to Joseph in a dream, through the lens of the rest of the biblical story, we should not be surprised.

Throughout the infancy narratives of Matthew's gospel, it is through dreams that God guides these chosen people through their mission. The Magi are warned through a dream not to return to Herod, and to go home by a different way. And in three separate dreams setting each stage of their itinerary, Joseph is warned to flee to Egypt, avoiding Herod's slaughter of the innocents, and then he is told to return to Palestine after the death of Herod and finally to settle in Nazareth.

But it is this first recorded dream of Joseph that is most bizarre and requires the greatest amount of faith. For in this dream the angel of the Lord reveals to Joseph that his beloved Mary to whom he is betrothed, is with child; and moreover that the child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. He is commanded to protect and provide for the child as if it was his very own biological son and that after he is born, he should be named Jesus—and so poor Joseph doesn't even get to pick out a name for this child, who has been thrust into his life.

Actually, the Lord reveals in a dream to Joseph two names for the child that capture and epitomize the boy's life and mission:

1st, the Lord orders Joseph to name the child “Jesus,” for he will save his people from their sins. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Joshua. It literally means: The Lord saves. In other words, Matthew is announcing from the beginning of his story that the focus of Jesus’ life will be to bring salvation to sinners by means of His death on the cross.

And then Matthew adds a foot note to the name Jesus. He reminds the reader that Jesus’ birth brings to fulfillment an ancient prophecy from Isaiah about a virgin giving birth to a son and so a second name emerges. Isaiah had spoken of a child being named Emmanuel, and Matthew now applies that reference to Jesus; Emmanuel which means “God is with us.”

This second name for Jesus sounds a critical theme for understanding the mission of Jesus. It is more than an affirmation of God’s presence in Jesus during his earthly life.

If the name Jesus points to the cross where Jesus saved his people from their sins, then Emmanuel affirms the ongoing presence of the resurrected Jesus in the life of his people because God is indeed with us, in this life and the next. We owe much to Mary and Joseph who are heroes who said “yes” to God’s bigger dream.

And so when Joseph woke up from this dream, he obeyed the directions given to him, even though it required him to totally rearrange his life plan and to suspend all he thought he knew about reality.

Of course, we rightly focus on Luke’s gospel account of the Blessed Virgin Mary during the Christmas season, for her obedience and purity were crucial in the story of the birth of Christ, while Matthew tells the

Christmas story through the lens of Joseph, who also played a crucial role of obedience and courageous faith.

The point of the Christmas story is that God is breaking into human history, stepping out on the world stage, in a fresh and redeeming way. In Christ, God came in person to each of us, for each of us. God is not far off and removed, nor asleep. God did not just wind up the universe like a toy, and then sit back and watch it run down to its' eventual end. No, in the Christmas story, we hear of God's irrepressible initiative toward us, loving us when we are unloving or just simply ignoring Him. So if God is so interested to come to us in this story, why would we assume that God cannot or will not continue to speak to His obedient followers and to enter the world again and again through the obedience and service of those who hear His voice? Will we open ourselves to the possibility this Christmas season to the reality that God still speaks, still cares about our world and still wants to involve people like you and me in His great redemptive plan?

If we could believe that, and act like that, wouldn't the world be better for it? If Ebenezer Scrooge could wake up from his night of dreams to become a generous man, how much more could it happen to those of us who have learned to discern and listen to the whispers of our God?