



“Joseph’s Story”

Matthew 1:18-25

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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. 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.”

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

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.

- Matthew 1:18-25

Joseph is the patron saint of cabinetmakers, confectioners, engineers, immigrants, house hunters, travelers, pioneers, pregnant women, fathers, married people, Austria, Belgium, Bohemia, Canada, China, Korea, Viet Nam, Manchester, New Hampshire, San Jose, California, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and Nashville, Tennessee. It is an impressive list, but Joseph's connection to Nashville, for instance, seems tenuous at best. Joseph should be the patron saint of taking chances.

After several months of pretending to be interested in china patterns and bridesmaids dresses, Joseph discovers that the simplest response is, “Yes, dear.”

They have lined up the rabbi and organist. They have ordered the flowers. Joseph has reserved the honeymoon suite. Joseph's brother has begun planning the bachelor party.

Things are going according to schedule until Joseph's future is undone and his insides torn up by Mary's unplanned pregnancy. His hopes and dreams have been destroyed.

He wants to ask Mary, "How did this happen?" but he does not want to know how this happened.

He decides to break off the engagement quietly. When people ask he will say nothing more than, "The marriage just wasn't going to work."

The right thing to do is to put this behind him quickly, get on with his life, and let Mary get on with hers. Joseph will find a safer, more predictable wife.

Then he has a dream in which an angel says, "Joseph, don't be afraid. Go ahead and marry her. The child belongs to God. It's a boy."

So without the benefit of an ultrasound, Joseph knows it is a boy—or maybe it was just a dream. When he wakes up, he is more confused than ever.

Joseph is a supporting role in the Christmas story. Luke barely mentions him. Joseph does not get a single line of dialogue in all of the New Testament. In manger scenes, Mary and Jesus are center stage. Joseph is in the shadows. Joseph looks worn out, like he would be more comfortable in a funeral home than a delivery room. In the crèche on the coffee table, if Joseph's head gets knocked off—as often happens to ceramic Josephs—you can always promote a shepherd.

When Matthew describes Joseph as a righteous man, we picture an earnest, honest carpenter whose work is all the excitement he wants. It is easy to imagine Joseph as cautious and careful. The rule for carpenters is "Measure twice, cut once." The long-expected Jesus comes pretty fast for Joseph. He is being asked to assume responsibility for a young woman and her baby with only a voice in a dream to go on.

The prophet Jeremiah can wax philosophical about righteous branches springing up from David, but for Joseph this is not about ancient prophecies—roses blooming from tender

stems or Jesse's lineage. It is about Joseph's fiancé getting pregnant without him. Breaking up with Mary is reasonable. Dreams are easy to leave behind. Ignoring a whispering angel is not hard.

Even if Joseph could convince himself to believe Mary, no one else will believe her. He should shake it off, cancel the caterer, and admit a dream is just a dream. Haven't you ignored dreams with more details than this one?

Against all odds, Joseph pushes aside the facts and follows the dream. He will marry a pregnant teenager and be the adopted father of her child. He will take this risk on the basis of nothing more substantive than a dream. This roll of the dice is Noah building the ark when there is no rain in the forecast, Ruth buying two tickets to Bethlehem, Esther nailing a mezuzah to her door, Atticus Finch defending Tom Robinson, and Peter Parker putting on the Spiderman suit.

Joseph is not careful. When faced with the choice of doing what is reasonable or taking a big risk, Joseph embraces the unexpected. He knows he will have to deal with his doubts about Mary. He will have to learn not to hear the snickers. When the baby is born and people count the months, they will not think of Joseph as quite so honorable. He will look into the face of the baby and be unable to see the reflection of his own face. Joseph is a visionary who desperately wants the dream to be true.

Joseph thinks, "Whether it's true or not, this is what I want to believe."

What kind of man marries a woman who is having someone else's child? What kind of person makes such an important decision on the basis of a dream? When we think of Christmas as God's invitation to be safe and warm, we are mistaken. God's angels tell us, "Don't be afraid to follow dreams."

We are tempted to a cautious life, keep six of the Ten Commandments, go to church twice a month, give money we do

not need, spend time we can spare, try to do a little more good than bad, and offer some grace and a lot of judgment. God invites us to more, to wish for what is most true.

God's people long for God—even when we wonder what that means. Paying attention to the yearning we feel is itself following God's dreams for us. When we are dissatisfied with a cautious faith, it is because God wants more for us. God offers obscure intuitions that there is truth more wonderful than we have imagined, grace beyond what we have suspected, and hope greater than we have dreamed.

This is Langston Hughes:
“Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die
life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams for when dreams go
life is a barren field frozen with snow.”

Another great American poet, Jimmy Buffett, writes:
“How does it happen? How do we know who sits and watches,
who does the show? Some people love to lead and some refuse
to dance. Some play it safely, others take a chance. Still it's all
a mystery this place we call the world—where most live as
oysters while some become pearls.”

God's people are pearls, romantics, and dreamers. God invites us to practice the scales of hopefulness, play new music when God puts it in front of us, to be the visionaries who expect the unexpected, listen for improbable truth, and embrace the unlikely.

Nancy Dahlberg tells this story: Our family was driving from San Francisco to Los Angeles on Christmas Day. That year Christmas came on Sunday. We needed to be in Los Angeles on Monday morning, having spent Christmas Eve with my husband's parents.

We stopped for lunch at a diner in King City. I was feeling warm and fuzzy when my reverie was interrupted. I heard Erik, our one-year-old son, scream with glee in his high chair—“Hi there”—two words he thought were one. He pounded his fat

baby hands—whack, whack—on the metal tray of the high chair. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, and gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled, chirped and giggled, and then I saw the source of his merriment.

A tattered rag of a coat—greasy, worn. Baggy pants, both they and the zipper at half-mast over a spindly body. Toes that poked out of would-be shoes. A shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over and a face like none other. Gums as bare as Erik's. Hair unwashed, uncombed, unbearable. Whiskers too short for a beard, but way beyond the shadow stage. And a nose so varicose that it looked like the map of New York.

I was too far away to smell him, but I knew he smelled. His hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists: “Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster.”

Erik laughed and called, “Hi there.” Every call was answered. I turned the high chair. Erik screamed and twisted around to face his old buddy. The waitresses' eyebrows were rising.

Several diners had stopped their conversations to stare. This old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby. Now the old man was shouting from across the room, “Do ya know peek-a-boo? Hey look, he knows peek-a-boo.”

The guy was drunk. Nobody thought anything was cute. My husband was embarrassed. I was humiliated. Even our six-year-old wanted to know why that man was talking so loud. We ate hurriedly and in silence, all except Erik, who continued to run through his repertoire with the old man.

My husband rose to pay the check, telling me to meet him in the parking lot. I grabbed Erik and headed for the exit. The old man sat poised and waiting, his chair directly between me and the door.

I prayed, “God, let me out of here before he speaks to me.”

I tried to side-step, to put my back between Erik and any air the old man might be breathing. But Erik, with his eyes riveted on his new best friend, leaned far over my arm, reaching out

with both arms in a baby's pick-me-up gesture. In the split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man.

His eyes were imploring: "Would you let me hold your baby?"

There was no need to answer. Erik propelled himself from my arms into the man's and immediately laid his head on the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, and cradled my baby. The old man stroked and rocked Erik for a moment, then opened his eyes and looked squarely into mine.

He said in a firm, commanding voice, "You take care of this baby."

I said, "I will."

He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me. "God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas present."

I said nothing more than a muttered thanks. With Erik back in my arms, I ran for the car. Dennis wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly and why I was saying, "My God, my God, forgive me" (Nancy Dahlberg, "Erik's Old Man," *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*, Health: Deerfield Beach, Florida, 1997, 307-309).

God invites us to stop being cautious, open our arms wide, embrace the unexpected, and allow the unexpected to embrace us.

Dream of loving God with all of our heart—thinking not at all about the expectations of those who have forgotten how to dream. Dream of the people we love and of letting go of our jealousy and cynicism, offering only words of kindness. Dream little dreams—speaking to someone you do not speak to, giving money you did not expect to give, and doing something good instead of something easy. Dream big dreams—risking your job

to do what is right, taking a lower-paying job that matters more, and raising your children to serve rather than be served.

Dream of God waiting for us to take one step in the direction of love and discovering that love is always with us. Dream of this church as a family where male and female, black and white, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, straight and gay, old and young, and saints and sinners gather to give thanks to God. Dream of caring for refugees, immigrants, old men, and unwed mothers. Dream of a world where people take chances and discover that God is not only our hope, but that God has placed that hope within us.

Dream of angels inviting us to take our place next to Christ.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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