

# CONTRARY DREAMIN' ON SUCH A WINTER'S DAY

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH, DECEMBER 19, 2004  
THE REV. JOHN WM. BENNISON, REL.D, RECTOR

Appointed Gospel text for the Fourth Sunday of Advent Season:

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 shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall 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

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...

Everyone dreams. But have you ever had one of those dreams that was so vivid and telling that it startled you into reconsidering where you'd come from, who you were, or – contrary to all your wakeful plans – where you were headed? The kind of dream that runs contrary to all your daydreaming? The kind of extraordinary dream even an ordinary Joe might have? Most likely, we all have.

Describing last night's dreams to another person is usually about as exciting as telling them about your last operation, or your last road trip to Fresno, including your best gas mileage and favorite rest areas. But briefly, here's a dream I had last Wednesday night that startled me awake with a self-conscious laugh at three o'clock in the morning.

I was seated in a restaurant in downtown Walnut Creek in the middle of the afternoon, when the tables were nearly empty and the customer traffic was light. I looked up and saw someone seated alone in the opposite corner, staring at me. Though it was someone whom I had not seen, nor with whom I had had little contact for over twenty-five years, I recognized her immediately as someone who had at one time been a very significant part of my life. In fact, we'd once been married for eight years.

In my dream, the apparition stood up and walked over to my table and sat down across from me. She looked older; but, then again, I figured I probably looked older to her too! She began to speak and went on for a short while, until I interrupted her. Slowly, deliberately, I asked, "What do you need to hear me say to you?" I knew the answer, before she could really begin to reply. So as she began to speak again, I looked at her and simply said, "I'm sorry." Then I awoke. It

was 3:00 A.M. It was a cold winter's night, but the bedcovers were warm and reassuring, and I could return to sleep.

After a quarter of a century, a collage of images, experience and memory stirred from who knows where in my subconscious to manifest itself in what was for me a powerful dream. In modern dream science research, the debate has progressed to the point of exploring and interpreting such ordinary phenomena as a combination of physiological changes which occur in different portions of the brain in sleep mode, to all the psychological twists and turns we weave over a lifetime; with enough cumulative raw material to make a psychotherapist absolutely drool over the prospect of three sessions a week for the rest of one's natural days. What inner conflict was seeking resolution in the dream sequence I conjured up for myself last Wednesday night? Or, what did I eat for supper? These weren't always the most common questions.

Ancients, of course, believed dreams were visions and visitations of divine spirits or other celestial beings, quite apart from one's own body, mind and spirit.

The Bible, too, is filled with such experiences, described as dreams. There's Jacob's ladder and wrestling match. There's Joseph's dreams with their bleak forecasts of Pharaoh's plagues. There's Mary's visitation by the archangel, Gabriel, with the same startling news Joseph receives in his own dream in this morning's gospel passage. And there is the warning dream the magi have, not to return and share their joyous news with the treacherous Herod.

On the other hand, Greek philosophers, like Aristotle and Hippocrates, suggested dreams were a product of our own invention; their usefulness lay in our ability to inform us (and therefore have a hand in shaping) our own destiny, and even as a means of diagnosing illness.

The medieval Church, wishing to remain the sole intermediary with the divine, would often disparage dreams and visions as devil's work, rather than divine illumination or visitation.

Leaping centuries with huge generalizations, the father of modern psychiatry, Sigmund Freud, of course moved the discussion back to the self, dredging up out of the formative subconscious of childhood all our adult manifestations of this alternate reality; while Carl Jung broadened the ecumenical horizons to identify the basic archetypes common to all peoples and cultures.

Finally, modern scientific studies joined in partnership with the psychological community, with the discovery of such things as REM (rapid eye movement during sleep), to place dream interpretation solidly in the realm of these dual disciplines.

So, with the impressive advancements of human inquiry into the dreams of mere mortals, what's an ordinary Joe to do when he bolts upright in bed in the middle of the night with some startling and revelatory news that runs so contrary to all his daydreaming? What about a dream like Joseph's dream?

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Matthew begins his assertion in a very straightforward way: “Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way.” It’s helpful to remember that only two of the four canonical gospels (Matthew and Luke) even bother to give us a nativity story of Jesus. And the two gospels have somewhat different accounts. But without their indulgence or interest, we wouldn’t be celebrating another Christmas holiday this week. The earliest gospel (Mark) and the latest gospel (John) apparently see little importance in Jesus’ birth. Why?

First, it’s safe to say Jesus never wrote an autobiography, and the gospels themselves are not biographies of him either. While estimates place his birth date around 33 CE, no mention of his childhood (except one story of a 12-year old in the temple) or early adulthood is included in any of the four canonical gospels. The four evangelists had no first-hand knowledge of knowing the historical Jesus, but could only draw from sources important to the early Church’s tradition that were deemed important enough to pass along. The Jewish convert Paul, writes the earliest Christian document we have in the form of earthly ministry, his teachings and healing miracles; and finally the *when* and *how* of his anointing as the Christ, the Messiah of God.

The earliest gospel, Mark, portrays Jesus’ anointing by the Spirit at the moment of his baptism by John, as he emerges out of Jordan’s waters. Matthew’s subsequent interest and concern was the possible misinterpretation that Jesus’ divinity would be seen as *adoptive*, and not *co-eternal* with God the father.

Furthermore, as a Jewish convert, it was important to Matthew that Jesus the Jewish Messiah be understood as the fulfillment of Israel’s long-awaited expectation; expressed for centuries through the Law and the prophets. Isaiah foretold it: “A virgin shall conceive, and bear a son ... and name him ‘*God with us*’.” Not only that, his lineage on his father’s side will be the royal bloodline of the great ancient King David. And all at once a father’s ordinary dream becomes Joseph’s extraordinary dream.

Matthew’s interest in portraying Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and tradition is consistent throughout his gospel, starting with his long recounting of the genealogy of Jesus back to the family tree of David and root of Jesse. While the long list of “begats” may appear as tedious and boring to us, it was of great importance and interest in Jewish culture. To the ancient Jew, one’s lineage was a way of identifying and understanding who someone *was*, not just from whence they came.

What’s fascinating about the genealogy in Matthew’s gospel is that within what was typically a *patriarchal* genealogy of Jesus we find included the names of five women. This would have been startling, in and of itself, in the ancient world. The women included are even more of a shock.

The first is Tamar, a Canannite (pagan) woman who poses as a harlot to trick Judah into sleeping with her so that she might bear sons, including the ancestor of the great Israelite king David. The second woman mentioned is Rahab, another Canaanite woman and a harlot, who helped Joshua’s spies fight the battle of Jericho. The third is Ruth, a gentile who married Boaz, and became the grandmother of King David. The fourth is Bathsheba, the woman with whom David committed adultery, becoming the mother of the great king Solomon. And finally there’s Mary, in this case, the “virgin” Mary, the mother of Jesus!

Matthew groups the blessed Mary, meek and mild, with this group of outsiders with rather tawdry reputations! But it is a group of women through whom God, in fact, had worked God’s presence and power throughout Israel’s long story. In Mary, Matthew purports to show how

God will once again – but this time uniquely through the incarnation of God’s own self – *actively insert* God’s life-giving Spirit into the human story; and do so quite literally and graphically, in such a way that not only the chosen elect, but all of humanity, will be redeemed. The Holy Spirit will impregnate a virgin.

Just imagine: The entire success of the assertion of a *pregnant* virgin and God’s incarnate plan, hinges on the very human relationship between Mary and a shadowy figure known as Joseph, son of David. As Matthew sets the stage: “When Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child ... from the Holy Spirit.”

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That’s a hard sell, in anybody’s book; but quite frankly probably more so today than when dreams and visions were less domesticated. Yet even in Matthew’s day people may have wondered how Joseph would perpetuate the lineage of David if he was not the physical father. In Jewish law, there was a provision Joseph could acknowledge Jesus by naming him “son of David,” and accepting legal fatherhood. But would he? Would you?

So, what kind of a guy was this Joseph character? Matthew tells us he’s a decent fellow, righteous, some would say even magnanimous, willing to quietly “dismiss her.” In fact, he had “resolved” to do this, Matthew says. And I imagine when Joseph consciously resolved this raging conflict within himself, he must have gone to bed that night, alone again; but with his mind settled. He’d finally be able to get a good night’s sleep, he must have thought to himself, after days of tossing and turning over the pain of his angry hurt and gnawing suspicions. A good night’s sleep would be welcome relief. But then a startling dream...

Perhaps it was a dream that had begun with a blinding flash the held within it every promise of releasing him to run wild and escape the drudgery of his mundane existence, a dead-end job and a bleak future for a Galilean peasant living under strict religious codes of behavior and a brutal and repressive occupation by the only superpower in the world. It was a dream that might have begun with sweet promise, like those daydreams he’d often had of Mary.

Contrary to everything else that beset his life, there’d been Mary. She’d been the sum of his hopes and dreams for sons, old age, companionship through the long winter’s night, and maybe even pomegranates in the spring ... Despite all else, she was one promised possession he’d prized above all else; and – though only a woman – he might even honor and cherish.

Only the day before, Joseph had been daydreaming. It was a typical day for a poor carpenter, working quickly while there was daylight, when the days were short and winter was blackening the sky well before supper. Hammer, and chisel, and hard olive wood; peg and mortise, table and stool. His nostrils would fill with the familiar smell of dust and wood chips, as he’d struggle to recall the scent of her hair.

He wondered if his rough and callused hands were already worn to feel how so soft the back of her neck must be, when they would one day soon curl up and lie together. It was only one man’s dream, a peasant’s dream; not much of a dream, by some standards: a length of days,

an insignificant life in the scheme of things, a winter sun for warmth, a peasants wife, and – if God would grant him such favor – sons. His own sons. What kind of father would he be? Too strict or gruff, lenient or neglectful, indulgent or loving, or – most likely, a little bit of everything? It would be blessing enough.

And then, contrary to an ordinary man's ordinary dreams, this intrusive dream and startling vision would rouse in him to another calling; and he would wake with the unwelcome call to take Mary as his wife, cast out his fears if he could – never mind his lost daydreams – and play the fool. A fool for God.

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The tradition would quickly go on to push Joseph's perfunctory role in the nativity story further back into the shadows, where his own dreams would fade. What of his own hopes and hurts? The gospels would tell of Mary weeping for her son at the foot of the cross on Calvary. Would anyone know to care to wonder about Joseph, his absence, or his aching heart?

In an apocryphal infancy gospel from Syria dated in the second century known as the *Protoevangelium of James* there is a fanciful legend that portrays Joseph as a widower who had two sons, which conveniently explains Jesus' brothers. It also provides a reasonable explanation why Joseph initially declines to take Mary as his wife because – as his script is written – "I already have two sons and am old." As if the divine scheme isn't enough of an insult, now the poor guy is even portrayed as over the hill and beyond the point of being any competition for the Holy Spirit.

So in this version, he simply takes her into his house, caring for her and protecting her virginity. Now Joseph is not just a simple carpenter. He's a general contractor who goes off on large construction projects, but returns home one day to discover she's pregnant. Even after a dream convinces *Joseph* that she is a pregnant *virgin*, they can't keep it a secret for long, for obvious reasons. The Temple elders learn of it, reproach Mary and Joseph, and demand a trial. They are compelled to drink something called "a water of conviction" that will presumably reveal their sins. They drink, nothing happens, and they're off the hook, but the apocryphal tales continue.

Then, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, an anonymous Latin author compiles a collection of ancient traditions in a document known as the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. In it there is a story of Mary and Joseph in an orchard. The pregnant woman is having cravings for the ripest fruit from the highest branch of the tallest tree. In the Late Middle Ages it becomes the beautiful English hymn, *The Cherry Tree Carol*.

When Joseph was an old man,  
an old man was he,  
He married Virgin Mary,  
the Queen of Galilee. *Repeat.*

Joseph and Mary  
walked through an orchard green.  
There were berries and cherries,  
as rich as might be seen. *Repeat.*

Mary said to Joseph,  
so meek and so mild,  
"Joseph gather me some cherries,  
for I am with child. *Repeat.*

Then Joseph flew in anger,  
in anger flew he.  
"Let the father of the baby  
gather cherries for thee." *Repeat.*

Then up spoke baby Jesus,  
from within Mary's womb,  
"Bend down the tallest tree,  
that my mother might have some." *Repeat.*

Then bent down the tallest branch,  
till it touched Mary's hand.  
Cried she, "O look, thou Joseph,  
I have cherries by command." *Repeat.*

When Joseph was an old man,  
an old man was he,  
He married Virgin Mary,  
the Queen of Galilee. *Repeat.*

On a winter's day, a day typically filled with ordinary hopes and dreams of an ordinary son of David, and child of God, something utterly contrary to the sum of all our everyday blessings and curses breaks in to confound us, transform us, redeem us. Contrary to all our conjuring, contrary to all the "hopes and fears of all our years," the forgotten fool of God welcomes our Emmanuel.

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