

Matthew 1:18-25
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God's Dream World

Matthew's gospel story begins with a long list of familiar and not so familiar names and now makes its way to Joseph. Joseph does not usually get much attention in our telling of the Christmas story. It is Mary who captures our imagination and most of the press, and rightfully so, really. After all, she is the one who carries the child and gives birth to him. We don't hear much about Joseph. We don't really know much about him. The gospels of Matthew and Mark tell us that Joseph was a carpenter, but only as an aside. And in many nativity scenes, as the poet Ann Weems notes, Joseph is often dressed in brown and stuck in the back of the stable.¹ Even the animals get a better spot on the stage. But for a moment, thanks to the writer of Matthew, we catch a glimpse of Joseph, this righteous man who takes on a role unlike anyone before or since.

[Read Matthew 1:18-25]

We have grown so accustomed to the dreamy little nativity scenes with the perfect little holy family. The carols tell us that all is calm and all is bright, that the mother smiles and Joseph stands calmly by, and of course they are all wearing halos. But that's just an idealized vision of Christmas Eve. We don't tend to spend much time on all that comes before. Luke gives us Mary's song and Elizabeth's joy, but Matthew gives us Joseph and a glimpse of the anguish and genuine fear that must be in the mix, as well as the heartache. Professor David Lose wants us to hear the heartache along with the joy. He notes that when we move so rapidly to the extraordinary aspects such as the virgin birth and the fulfilled prophecy, we risk overlooking the very human part of the story. Before the baby arrives, before we hear about the wise ones, we

¹ Ann Weems, "Getting to the Front of the Stable," *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

hear that Joseph is engaged to Mary. As you may know the language of engagement here is not the equivalent of popping the question, putting a ring on it, and setting up a page on theknot.com.

Instead, it is a legal agreement involving property and entire families:

[To be engaged means] essentially to be married yet without having consummated that marriage or as yet living together. Which means that when Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant, he can only conclude that she has been unfaithful to him and so likely experiences the pain, anguish, and sense of betrayal that any of us would [feel] at such a devastating revelation.²

This is not the life Joseph has dreamed of; this is not the future he had in mind. And now he must make a choice. By law, he could expose Mary, and she could be publicly stoned, although the rabbis had begun to move away from advocating that punishment in the first century. Public humiliation is a viable option, as is a quiet divorce—or “calling the engagement off quietly,” as the text softens it to say. No option prevents Joseph’s being worried or angry or ashamed or disappointed. No option gives him an easy out where he can save face. And yet, as Matthew tells us, Joseph is a righteous man, one who observes the law and seeks to be in right relationship with God and others. The writer of Matthew wants us to understand that Joseph wants to do the right thing. So, as many of us have been encouraged to do when faced with a big decision, he decides to sleep on it.

And he dreams. I have heard it said that we dream in black and white. That would make sense for Joseph. As a righteous and faithful man, he has studied the law and knows right from wrong, good from evil. But he is not simply a rigid law-keeper. Even before he tucks in for his long winter’s nap, his unsettled brain is already wondering what is truly righteous, what is kind,

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/advent-4-a-god-really-with-us/>

what is just. This text has me wondering if God's choosing Mary is not only about Mary, but about Joseph, too. As the man who will raise this child, could it be that this son of David, this one who carries David's royal blood in his veins might be the right man to help shape the son of God in the ways of the law and faith and justice? Joseph goes on to sleep what must be one of the most restless sleeps he has ever had, and he dreams. And as he dreams God shares a vision that offers a different way for this faithful man to be faithful. It is no longer a black and white dream of two difficult choices; instead Joseph catches a glimpse of God's dream where the son of God, the long awaited Messiah will be born. And Joseph will be the one to name him and claim him. In that instant, this dreamer sees the world as God sees it, not in black and white, but in vivid Technicolor.

But the dream does not magically solve everything. Although he is a descendant of David, Joseph is still a peasant living in occupied territory. He does not wake up to the world's being any different. But he is different. He has been changed, because he has heard from an angel that this child his fiancée carries is a child—as our affirmation says—like any other child and like no other child. With the help of an angel, Joseph is given insight into what this pregnancy is all about and who this birth is all about, but he is not given much more. He is not given a promise that all will be easy and pretty and wrapped up with the perfect bow. Instead he is told that the same God his ancestor David worshipped and served, the same God his ancestor Ruth came to know and love, the same God who called his ancestors Abraham and Sarah to venture out to a land to be named later is the God in the midst of this whole difficult, messy, unheard of life that now lies before him and Mary. This promise is no longer simply ancient words in the mouths of prophets, no longer words on a page in black and white. In Jesus—God with us—the promise takes on flesh and blood, brown flesh and red blood, a rich vivid dream

come true for Joseph and for everyone who longs to be saved. And the Joseph who has so often been relegated to the back of the stable dressed in shades of brown and gray comes alive, as do we.

What are your dreams this Christmas? While I can sing every word of “White Christmas,” I’m not sure that a perfect holiday where treetops glisten is everything my heart desires or longs for. As Christmas approaches at breakneck speed, God’s dream for Joseph about a flesh and blood Savior born to save a flesh and blood world speaks to what my heart truly longs for. This Savior is born not in a perfect place to a perfect couple in a perfect world where treetops glisten, but to and for a people who struggle with heartache and disappointment, to and for people who don’t have it all together—whatever “it” may be. In the midst of the dream God tells Joseph not to be afraid. In the midst of all of the shouting and finger-pointing and fake news and broken relationships and uncertain futures, I wonder if I am able to hear God’s telling me, telling us the very same thing. Because God has dreams for us, too. If we listen, I am convinced that we who are waiting, we who dream of healing and peace and joy and love will be met with the voice of God, too. It may be a whisper, it may be a shout, it may be only a murmur in our weary hearts, but that voice is still speaking, still telling us not to be afraid, to step forward in faith not into a flat world where everything is simply black and white, but into this world, God’s dream world where our Savior is born to save us, one and all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.