

“Believe the Dream”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
IV Advent – 22 December 2019  
Matthew 1:18-25

The Bible doesn’t tell us very much about Joseph. In fact, he disappears from the gospel stories while Jesus was still a toddler, except for that one little scene in Luke, where Joseph makes a cameo appearance when Jesus was twelve. But we know enough about him that I’d like to think he was a likeable guy. Here he is, excited about getting married. People probably already knew about the engagement. Certainly, his family would have, and all of sudden, Mary’s pregnant. It’s hard to imagine the hurt, the sense of betrayal he felt, their intimate relationship violated before it even got started, and he didn’t even know who the father was.

Joseph could have taken vengeance, turned Mary into an outcast, possibly even gotten her stoned to death, but “Joseph . . . unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” That’s merciful, admirable, noble, and in that part of the ancient world, with its laws and customs, I suspect Joseph’s reaction was exceptionally rare, but then he had a dream and life got even stranger.

An angel appeared to Joseph and encouraged him to go through with the marriage, because the baby Mary carried came from the Holy Spirit and would rescue people from sin, in fulfillment of a prophecy. I think most people, both then and now, would wake up and think, “OK. What a weird dream. Is the pressure driving me crazy? And then that dream would be disregarded, forgotten, or if remembered, quickly explained away before breakfast. But Joseph, described by Matthew as a “righteous man,” believed the dream.

He accepted that the angel was real and its message was true and had a claim on his life choices, despite the risk, and there was great risk in this. Every prospective parent feels at least a

little fear. There are so many unknowns. Can I do this right? How will it all turn out? Will my child be healthy? Will he or she be special, and if so, special in what way? Will she cure cancer someday, or will he wind up behind bars?

But imagine if an angel came to you and said, “Your child will be beyond special. Your child will be unique, the Son of God, who will someday, when he grows up, ‘save his people from sin.’” That’s scary. First off, not everybody wants to be saved from sin, at least not every hour of every day. Some people like sinful behavior and would rather be left alone. It reminds me of St. Augustine, who prayed, “O Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.”

Second, who’s going to believe you? Who’s going to believe him, and for those who don’t, how do you think they’re going to react? Sure, some will just shrug their shoulders and move on with life, but others will view your child as crazy at best, or at worst, as a serious threat, a liar leading people astray. Do you really think those people will just sit there and do nothing? God only knows what they might try to stop your son.

Now without doubt, Joseph was an unusually faithful, courageous man. That’s probably part of the reason why God chose him, but we need to stop putting people in the Bible like Joseph on a pedestal and assume that they’re above all of these common mortal emotions, like the wondering and the worrying every parent goes through to one degree or another. If he had any sense, and remember Joseph worked as a *tekton*, a carpenter and furniture maker, someone smart, someone with impressive skills, the man had to be scared at this revelation. And he went through with it anyway.

It’s amazing, and it’s humbling. How many times has one of us ignored an important message from God because it simply seemed incredible? As Ebenezer Scrooge said to Jacob Marley, “You’re just a bit of mustard or an undigested piece of meat!” We wake up from the

dream and open our eyes and close them again and go back to sleep, or maybe we pay attention to the dream and puzzle over it and try to figure out what it means, but begin to realize that following the dream doesn't quite fit with our plans, with what we want out of life.

It's too much trouble, and impossible anyway. Besides, God wouldn't choose miserable little me to play a role in something that really matters, something so big it could radically alter a single life, much less change the course of human history. And it's just too risky, taking the responsibility and accepting the potential consequences, all on the basis of a message delivered in a dream.

But without dreams, what a pitiful existence we lead, and without God, life is hopeless. Joseph fades from the story so fast, we hardly notice him. Mary has many hymns and even a special candle on the Advent wreath, different from all the others – and rightly so. But even the magi, pagan wise men, get more attention in the Bible than Joseph does. Yet we need focus on Joseph, because he shows us how to listen to the dream and obey the call of God. Yes, he was summoned to a unique, extraordinary purpose greater than almost any other. However, God also calls us, in different yet still very important ways, to help bring Jesus into the world, despite the scandal, the embarrassment, and the danger.

With rare exception, each of us, like Joseph, will fade from the story, our faithfulness all but forgotten, as the tide of history sweeps away our footprints like waves on a beach. But while we are still here, God has given us the opportunity to make a mark, to leave a legacy – not in stone or steel, but through the generosity of our mercy. Like Joseph with Mary, we can show mercy instead of being bitter and resentful and vengeful when someone does us wrong, because sometimes, when think we've been wronged, we actually haven't, and God just might be involved with that, same as He was with getting Mary pregnant.

In this world, filled with so much hatred and suspicion and rage and blame, if all we managed to do was obey God enough to be consistently, unselfishly, courageously merciful, what a dream that would be, what a service to the glory of God, what a witness to the love of Jesus. That healing grace, powered by the Holy Spirit, just might catch on, and someday, we or our children or grandchildren could sing the words, “Peace on earth, good will towards men,” and regard them as more than just a dream. Amen.