

“Messages”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

It rained hard last week, heavy enough to be described as an inundation. I was out driving in the worst of it, completely surrounded by a cascade of water. It made movement difficult: flooding, low visibility, but I took it slow and made it home from work safely, albeit in twice the time it usually takes, and eventually the clouds relented and the inundation stopped. If only it were so for the phenomenon we commonly call “information overload.” That never stops.

Oh, we can shut it down for a little while: turn off our cell phones; ignore our e-mail; keep the TV and radio turned off. But eventually, those devices have to be turned back on and their contents attended to: a big pile of accumulated e-mail, voice messages, text messages, the news of the world. We can’t escape all that indefinitely, no matter where we go or what we do, and who would really want to?

Isolation isn’t healthy. Connecting with people and the broader world helps shape who we are, but it is also true that we strive to cope with more information, more messages, than any other generation in history. It’s overwhelming, relentless. Like an inundation of rain, it can slow us down, make it hard to see very far in front of us, and keep us from going certain places. It can also be dangerous, because with so many messages demanding our attention and response, discerning the essential from the frivolous can prove very challenging, very confusing. We can miss what’s most important, and drown in meaningless minutiae.

In the midst of all this, how can we stay on the road and make it home safely in life? Well, there are plenty of books out there, some of them probably good, that can teach you

techniques for handling that inundation of information, but I doubt that technique alone will take us to where we want to be. Instead, I suggest we take a good hard look at Joseph.

Now he didn't have the technology available to us today, which was equal part blessing and burden. Beyond his field of vision and what people told him, Joseph didn't know much about what was happening, but here recently Joseph probably felt inundated by events and messages. Nine months ago, he discovered that his fiancée Mary was pregnant, not by him, and as he contemplated dismissing her graciously and honorably, an angel arrived with a message insisting that Joseph stay faithful to Mary.

Today's episode of their story starts with "After the wise men had left." We don't what messages the magi might have delivered to Joseph and Mary. Scripture simply doesn't say, but the costly gifts they offered spoke volumes. That same night, Joseph drifted off to sleep and another angelic message arrived. It was dreadful. "Get your wife and newborn child out of here and into Egypt, or your son will die violently and soon."

We're familiar with how Joseph responded. He quickly followed the angel's instruction, but our familiarity may cause us to miss how truly astounding Joseph's response was. Yes, he had already heeded the shocking words of an angelic messenger nine months previously, and that's commendable, a sign of deep and abiding faith in God. But fleeing to Egypt was a radical idea. Remember that the Exodus, the flight of Israel from slavery in Egypt, was the core religious event for Joseph and all Jewish people. Going back was risky, no guarantee of safety, though less dangerous than staying put, where a rampaging Herod was intent on eliminating any potential challenger to his throne.

So they went to Egypt and stayed there for years, cut off from home and family, everything familiar, and no doubt assailed in that foreign land by messages that contradicted

their core values and identity. Of course, Egypt was chosen, in part, to foreshadow future things. Jesus and his family would come back home, and this journey would symbolize how Jesus is the new Exodus, the new route of liberation, not only from economic and political oppression, but from the deeper and more destructive slavery to sin and death experienced by all people.

At some point, another angelic message arrived, telling Joseph to return home with his family, because the genocidal Herod had died, but Joseph was concerned that Herod's successor might not be much better, so he headed to Nazareth in Galilee, a prudent move confirmed by yet another angelic message.

What fascinates me about this whole sequence is that Joseph receives all of these angelic messages while he's dreaming. That's the norm in scripture, though there are notable exceptions. The angels come to Joseph when he's vulnerable, when his skepticism, his assumptions, the temptation to doubt what he sees with his own eyes and heard with his ears, have all been turned off for the night. In the dreams, Joseph is sheltered from all of the other messages the world has to foist upon him, so that he can focus on the one message that matters most, the one message that will help him fulfill God's purposes by keeping his family together and alive.

However, perhaps even more remarkable is that Joseph woke up from these dreams and took them seriously enough to act, often in very strange ways. Once he's awake, all the faculties and filters wake up, too: parsing the dream, its meaning, and its believability. It would have been easy for Joseph to shuck off the messages he received as a symptom of sleep deprivation – not uncommon for a new parent -- anxiety, stress, paranoia. In fact, we sophisticated modern folk may be tempted to view Joseph as just a touch gullible to take these dreams so literally, but

it is his wisdom that we need to handle the grotesque glut of messages that distract and exhaust and threaten to drown us.

First, we need to take our dreams, both sleeping and waking, seriously, even when they're weird, maybe especially when they're weird. Not every dream is a direct message from God, but God still uses dreams from time to time to get at us when our guard is down and we're not distracted. For those who don't dream or don't remember dreams well, daydreams can be a source of inspiration and revelation, and the state that we experience when we daydream can be induced through prayer, especially through meditative and contemplative practices, which Shelley will be teaching about every Sunday morning of Lent.

Beyond dreams, we need to hold faith in the fact that God sends us messages all of the time, and we need to be open and receptive to these messages, however they emerge: a chance encounter, a sequence of seemingly random and coincidental events, flickers of intuition that our rational mind might be conditioned to reject. We need to be sensitive, vigilant, aware, because angels often arrive in disguise. Even in the Bible, explicit angelic visitations are relatively rare, usually reserved to influence decisions that will literally alter history, but if an angel comes to you offering to guard and guide, treasure that experience, test it by sharing it with people of faith that you trust, and if it's authentic, do exactly what the angel says.

For any of this to be possible, though, we need to be selective and disciplined about the messages raining down upon us and which ones we allow to get through. We live in a cynical, skeptical culture that mocks credulity, sees in belief a sorry substitute for reason, and views faith as a facet of life instead of the driving force behind it. God has given us the critical faculty to deflect foolish and malevolent messages, and that ability becomes stronger and more incisive every time we use it. Like a man driving through a fierce rainstorm, if we keep our eyes and ears

open and focused, God will send us messages that will eventually bring us home and bring God's purposes to greater fruition. Amen.