
Believe in the Dreams of the Person You Love

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
Matthew 1.18-25

It was a few days before Christmas. A woman woke up one morning and told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" "Oh," he replied, "you'll know the day after tomorrow."

The next morning, she turned to her husband and said the same thing, "I just dreamed that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" "You'll know tomorrow," he said.

On the third morning, the woman woke up and smiled at her husband, "I just dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas. What do you think this dream means?" He smiled back, "Oh, you'll know tonight."

That evening, the man came home with a small package and presented it to his wife. She was delighted. She opened it gently. But when she did, she found--a book! It was titled "The Meaning of Dreams."

What have you been dreaming about lately?

Some of us are dreaming about wonderful possibilities. We're dreaming of pearl necklaces and sugar plum fairies, new bicycles and upgraded computers. I hope all those dreams come true!

As I consider my own dreams, I realize that I dream in two major categories. I have two kinds of dreams. Sometimes, my dreams are dreadful. I imagine painful relationships. I live out meetings and deadlines that I have missed. I am standing in a pulpit, for instance, with nothing to say. These are nights that I spend wrestling like my ancestor, the patriarch, Jacob.

But on other occasions, my dreams are the most refreshing I can imagine. I have also dreamed about reconciliation. I have dreamed that enemies are at my table, and we are living convivially. I have dreamed of flying fancily through the air. I have dreamed of new life and hope. I have dreamed of lean years followed by wonderful years. These are nights that I dream like my ancestor, the patriarch, Joseph. Yes, Joseph in the Old Testament, too, was a dreamer.

During this past year, researchers at Harvard University "asked people to navigate a maze, and found that those who both napped and dreamed about their maze experience, in any way, showed a tenfold improvement when they did the maze a second time." (*The Week* magazine, Dec 24, 2010, page 32.) The suggestion is that dreams make you smarter. The magazine called *The Week*, said that the process "isn't necessarily rational or literal" but reflects a deeper process in which the unconscious mind consolidates what it has learned and produces new insights." (*The Week* Magazine, Dec 24, 2010, page 32).

That is my answer to the question, "Why do we need sleep?" We need sleep in order to dream. We need to dream.

Today's gospel lesson, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, is about a dream, Joseph's dream. Besides the wise men, a few verses later, Joseph is the only person in the New Testament who dreams. Other characters have visions, and the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. But only Joseph dreams.

And only Matthew tells Joseph's story. The more familiar story, which we have known for as long as we have seen Christmas pageants, is about Mary receiving the word of the Lord, from an angel. But that story is only in the Gospel of Luke.

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story from another point of view, maybe a forgotten point of view these days. Matthew tells the story from the man's point of view, Joseph's point of view. All the action in Matthew's birth narrative revolves around Joseph taking action. Nothing against Mary and Luke, of course! But it's good, once every three years in our lectionary cycle, to hear the story from Joseph's point of view!

(By the way, in our two other gospels, Mark and John, there is no account whatsoever of the physical birth of Jesus. We have four gospels, and they differ dramatically in how they tell the story of Jesus's birth. That's why we have four gospels. And that's why we have many types of Christians!)

Surely, Joseph was in a troubled way. Joseph, a man of decency and responsibility, realized that his betrothed was actually pregnant before they were married. What should he do?

Well, he took time to sleep. He took time to rest. He took time to dream. Somehow, it was in his dream that Joseph consolidated things; he put it all together. He realized something wonderful and astounding. Ancient scriptures, an angel, all sorts of theologizing, came flooding into his soul. Yes, God would enter the world. Immanuel, "God With Us" would be born to his wife, as crazy as that was to understand.

Joseph had to trust the angel in his dream, but Joseph also had to trust someone else. Joseph had to trust Mary. I know Mary would be his wife, and surely Joseph must have loved Mary. But still, this took a lot of trust! For Joseph, the way of salvation meant trusting someone else.

This is why Joseph's dream is so important. Joseph dreamed of the salvation of the world. And he dreamed that true salvation comes through someone else.

That is the lesson for us, too. Like Joseph sometimes, we are supposed to trust God and then get out of the way. Trust that God is working through our wife, and then get out of the way. Trust that God is working in our children, and then get out of the way.

Imagine young Mary, minding her own business, suddenly being overcome with news of a great conception, a great presence of the divine. It's something to have an angel speak to you. Wouldn't it be great to know that such a revelation might happen again?

Well, you know what? It did happen again.

The angel did appear to someone besides Mary. The story is recorded right in the Bible, but not in Luke. It appears in Matthew. The angel did appear to someone else. The angel appeared to Joseph.

Now, if the angel can appear to Mary, and then also appear to Joseph, that means that the angel can appear to you and me, too. In the Bible, the annunciation does not occur only once, but twice"" not just to a woman, but also to a man. Not just to Mary and Joseph, but also to you and to me!

What are you giving for Christmas this year? I do not mean what are you getting. We all want something wonderful, I am sure. But what are you giving for Christmas?

The greatest gift you can give this year is to believe in somebody, to believe in someone's dreams, to believe that God is

working in the person beside you. That's the gift that Joseph gave Mary, and, thus, the gift that Joseph gave the entire world.

Likewise, the great gift you can give is to have faith in someone else; believe in their dreams. Believe in the dreams of the person you love. Believe in the dream of your husband. Believe in the dream of your wife. Believe in the dreams of your children. Believe in the dream of your hero, your leader, your friend. Believe in their dreams!

And sleep comfortably this season. I know some folks do not sleep well. Too much worry. Too much food and drink. Take time to sleep.

The reason we sleep is to dream; and the reason we have relationships is so that we will have someone who will believe our dreams.

God works through those relationships. God works through both Mary and Joseph. God needs both Luke's story of the annunciation and Matthew's story of Joseph's dream. They are miracle stories.

God works through a young and wonderful woman, and her husband believes in her. It is a miracle repeated again and again. Believe in the dreams of the person you love. Believe in dreams this Christmas, and Jesus will be born again. Believe in dreams this Christmas, and God will appear in the world.

AMEN.

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