

## **“Dream On”**

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

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How well do you remember dreams? I'm not talking about the ones that occur during church services, but the night time variety. Many remember dreaming but struggle to recall the details. This is why some people that have an interest in tracking and interpreting dreams keep a notepad by their bed and write down key words that help them to remember their dreams.

I doubt that Joseph needed a notepad to remember the dream recorded in Matthew 1:18-25. This was the kind of dream that stays with you for a lifetime. It actually changes your life. It did Joseph's.

I wonder how long it took Joseph to go to sleep that night. Mary told him some disturbing news, the kind that makes you restless and keeps you from sleeping. According to Matthew, she was going to have a baby and it was not his.

What was Joseph to do? Under the Jewish law, he was obligated to break off their engagement, condemn her and even have her stoned to death. What kind of example was he setting and message was he sending to the community if he did not?

He made his decision. He would protect her as much as possible and send her away privately. He would not make a public spectacle of her, but neither would he stay with her and support her. Then he slept.

Listen to the way Matthew describes what happened. “But after he had considered 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, because what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name, Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means, God with us.’

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife. He had no union with her until she gave birth to a son and he gave him the name Jesus” Matthew 1:20-25.

You know what intrigues me about this story? Joseph never speaks. The story prominently features him, but he does not utter a word.

Don't interpret this to mean that we do not know anything about Joseph. His story is told by what he does, not what he says. Nor does it mean that we cannot learn some valuable life lessons from him. As a matter of fact, Joseph teaches us a lot about life and relationships. Let me share some things I have learned from him.

**The best way to help people that are struggling is to walk alongside them.** This is especially true if they appear to be alone.

It was one of my favorite parts in the movie, “The Nativity.” Joseph and Mary were on their way out of the village of Nazareth to make the one hundred mile trek to Bethlehem. Caesar ordered a census and each male had to return to his place of birth with

his family to register. In this scene, Mary was riding on a donkey and Joseph was walking alongside her.

By this time, the citizens of Nazareth have shunned Mary because they thought she had been promiscuous. She was going to have a baby and was not married. They would not talk to Mary or have anything to do with her any longer. Because Joseph stuck by her side, his good name and reputation tumbled just like Mary's.

In this departing scene, the people watched as Mary and Joseph slowly made their way out of town. As they passed the people, most of them looked at Mary with contempt and deliberately looked away after catching a glance of her. No one waved, said goodbye or offered words of encouragement for the long journey.

As they passed the last person and headed out of town, Joseph said to Mary with a twinkle in his eye and a bit of sarcasm in his voice, "These people are really going to miss us." Everyone in the theater laughed.

As I watched this particular scene in the movie it dawned on me that the best way to reach out to people that are struggling is to walk alongside them. This is what Joseph did for Mary. What an inspiring role model he is.

**Who has done this for you?** Who has walked with you "through the valley of the shadow of death so you would fear no evil?" You will never forget them, will you?

**Who needs you to do this for them now?** Who do you know that is struggling that needs companionship? Who has been shunned and abandoned that needs a warm embrace and encouraging word? Who needs someone to walk alongside them when others turn their heads? Perhaps this is the finest gift you could give them for Christmas. I cannot think of anything they need more nor can I think of a better way to be the presence of Christ in their life. As Anglican priest Brian McGowan wrote, "Discipleship is all about living out Emmanuel."

**What do you need to do in order to help someone that is struggling?** You may need to do what Joseph did and change your mind. You recall that Joseph's initial response to Mary's news was to send her away. This reaction was instinctual. He thought this was what was expected of him and was prepared to do it until he had that dream.

So what changed his mind? He listened. He listened to his heart, Mary's heart, but most of all he listened to God's heart.

Last week, I introduced my Advent sermon series by focusing our attention upon Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. You recall that he was going about his priestly duties when an angel appeared to him and told him that he and Elizabeth were going to have a baby. Because he questioned how this would occur at their age, he was unable to speak for almost a year.

Men are strangely quiet in the first chapter of Luke. Zechariah's voice was taken away and Joseph never speaks. Who does? Elizabeth and Mary, which was most unusual. Women were seen in that culture but not heard. And what did they say? They talked about the kind of world they wanted their children to grow up in, a new social order built upon justice, mercy, humility, generosity, tolerance, patience, peace and love.

What was Luke's message for his readers, including us? Advent is a time for listening to voices that get drowned out at other times. It is a time for listening to those that we normally ignore or discount.

The voices from Joseph's past and present told him to abandon Mary since she had apparently been unfaithful. If he did not, he would risk his own reputation and good name.

In a small community, it is hard to ignore these powerful voices and you pay a high price if you do. You are usually ridiculed, maligned and ostracized. Your business and family suffer. Many times, you end up moving to a new location and starting all over.

Joseph was prepared to do what everyone expected him to do and fulfill his obligation to the law, at least to a degree. He would not satisfy those looking for blood, but he would send Mary away and start a new life without her. After sleeping, he changed his mind. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary as his wife."

**Is there a decision you need to reconsider?** Have you been disappointed and hurt by someone and made the decision to cut off all ties to them? I wonder what Joseph would say to you about that decision? I think he would encourage you to reconsider. I believe Matthew would, too.

**Why do you think Matthew told this story?** I'm sure he wanted to add the birth narrative to the story of Jesus' life, something which only he and Luke did. Could there have been another reason, though? Could he be teaching his readers what it means to be a righteous person in a broken and messy world? I think so.

For many in that culture, a righteous person was someone that was devoted to keeping the commandments of God. He studied the law and meticulously observed the religious rituals, feasts and festivals. He dotted every "I" and crossed every "T," or as Theodore Wardlaw writes, "He colored inside the lines." And Joseph, you remember, was regarded as a righteous man.

However, when it came time to deal with Mary according to the law and have her stoned to death for what she had done, Joseph balked. He changed his mind. He did not send her away but became Mary's advocate, full of mercy and compassion.

Was Matthew using Joseph as a model for righteousness? Was he trying to help his readers understand that a righteous person puts people first and responds to their needs with mercy and compassion? I think so.

I do not believe it was coincidental that the first story associated with Jesus was a story about compassion, mercy, grace, hope, second chances and sacrificial love. Isn't this the gospel message? Isn't this the good news Jesus proclaimed?

From whom did Jesus learn this? Who modeled this for him? I think you know. The man that never uttered a word in the gospels taught him about compassion, mercy and hope.

For the first time I see a connection between this story and many others in Jesus' life. Do you recall the time Jesus was confronted with the woman that was caught in the act of adultery that the religious authorities wanted to stone. How did Jesus respond to her dilemma and their expectations? Could he have been more compassionate and courageous? I don't think so. "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to cast a stone at her" John 8:7.

Where did he learn to be an advocate of the powerless and offer hope for those in despair? Who taught him to stand up for the underdog? Who taught him to courageously walk alongside those that were struggling? Who taught him to listen to the voices that are

often ignored or discounted? Who taught him to color outside the lines? Now you see the connection, too, don't you?

Who has modeled this kind of righteousness for you? Who was your Joseph that came to your aid and defense? Who kept you from being alone in your struggles?

Who needs you to walk with them now, even if it means changing your mind about how to respond to them? Let Joseph inspire you and follow his lead.