

Dreamers

Last year, when the marriage was arranged, Joseph could hardly believe it. Joseph could hardly believe that her father had agreed to it. Joseph doesn't have much to offer her. He's not a wealthy man. He has only a modest dwelling with a workshop out back and one animal—a donkey. He's just a simple tradesman. And he's not as young as he used to be.

Can it really be that he's to wed the loveliest girl in the village? Mary! Those deep, dark eyes. That shining, silken hair. Slender. Serious. Soft-spoken. Still in her teens. Joseph could hardly believe his good fortune. Mary was to be his bride.

According to the custom of their people, after the betrothal took place, Mary was to remain in her parents' house for a year. During that time, although there was no intimate relationship, the two of them were pledged to one another. Just as though they were already married.

This engagement—as *we* might refer to it— isn't like a twenty-first century engagement that can be ended relatively easily. A first-century betrothal is legally binding. Unfaithfulness is considered adultery. The agreement can be broken only by divorce. Or by death.

Joseph's and Mary's betrothal period is nearly complete. Their year is almost up. It wouldn't be long until she would become his wife. A great wedding festival would take place. All of Nazareth would come to celebrate with them. And Joseph would take Mary to his home.

But now, how can that ever happen? Ever since he heard the news, his world has shattered around him. She's *pregnant*. Mary's pregnant. She's carrying a child. And it's not Joseph's. It *can't* be his. He hasn't known her in that way. He can't marry her now.

Profound disappointment fills him. Feelings of hurt. Betrayal. Shame. He hears neighbors whispering behind his back, gossiping about who the father might be. He's not unaware of their pitying glances. And in the market square, he sees the knowing looks—the smirks—of other men. Endures

their crude comments. *Hey, Joseph, you son of a gun! Just couldn't wait for the wedding night, could you?*

The happiness that welled up in him before he found out—it's been replaced by an overwhelming sadness. What will he do? Some men might make a public example of one in Mary's situation. Obtain a messy divorce. According to the Law of Moses, adultery is punishable by death.

Even if she weren't stoned, Mary would—at the very least—be publicly humiliated. Disgraced. Shunned. Ostracized by both her own family and the faith community. With no means of support, she'd face the prospect of starvation. No. He can't do it. Not to Mary. Compassion won't let him.

Instead, he's made up his mind to divorce her privately. Discreetly. Joseph has it planned. When people ask what happened, all he's going to say is: *It just didn't work out.* Not another word. That's the kind of person Joseph is.

Still, the heaviness in his heart won't go away. Even at night as Joseph lies on his bed. Even as he slips into that nebulous place between waking and sleeping.

Could this be a place where you find yourself sometimes? Not quite awake, but not quite asleep, either? Just on the edge of consciousness, where it's difficult to distinguish between dreams and waking events? Have you ever had a dream that seemed so real that when you awoke, you weren't quite certain that it hadn't actually happened? That it was—after all—just a dream?

Dreams have fascinated us human creatures since our earliest days. Do dreams reflect the memories and imaginings of the subconscious mind? Are they no more than the fragments and remnants of ordinary existence? Are they manifestations of our deepest fears? Expressions of our fondest hopes? Or could they be something more? Could our dreams be one of the many ways in which God speaks to us?

I believe that they are. As Joseph drifts into sleep that night, a luminous being shimmers into his dream. The Lord's angel begins the way angels in Scripture always begin. With the words: *Do not be afraid.*

And the rest of the angel's message goes something like this: *Joseph, I know that fearfulness is part of your human*

condition. But all that you and Mary have had together, you still have. Don't hesitate to marry her and become her husband.

Because she has not been unfaithful to you! No other man made Mary pregnant. The child was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And it's a boy, Joseph. A son!

You're to be his earthly father, Joseph. Accept him as your own, and give him his name, as fathers do. Name him Jesus, which means "he will save."

When Joseph awakens, he's alone. The angel's departed. But joy overflows in Joseph—joy and wonder, and the blessed peace of knowing that of all the experiences he's ever had in his life, nothing has ever been more real—more true—than this dream and its message. The message that's been given to Joseph.

For Joseph plays a vital part in God's plan of salvation. And it's here in Matthew's Gospel that we hear Joseph's story. The only other birth narrative, in Luke's Gospel, features *Mary's* role. In artists' portraits of the Holy Family, Mary and

her child get center stage. Joseph's usually relegated to the background. Usually in the shadows. In nativity scenes, you might inadvertently put a shepherd in the place of Joseph, the carpenter. A carpenter by trade.

Now I know a man who works with wood. Most guys who work with wood are devoted to their craft. They're good people. Creative people. Faithful people. Quiet people. They may not say much except, "Measure twice. Cut once."

Joseph the carpenter doesn't have much to say. In fact, in Matthew's account, Joseph doesn't say one single word. It's not his words, but his actions that shape our understanding of Joseph. It's not what he says, but what he *does* that makes all the difference.

Joseph is a righteous man who knows and observes the Law of his people. But the Law says that someone who has committed an offense—in this case, only an *apparent* offense—must suffer the consequences. And the Law says that a man has the right to choose whether to accept—or *not* accept—a child as his own.

But if Joseph had acted according to the letter of the Law, what would have happened to Mary? What would have happened to Mary's unborn child? What would have happened to God's age-old plan to send a Savior?

I think that one of the reasons Matthew shares this story is so his readers—so you and I—will reflect on these questions. Matthew is careful to be sure we understand that the child to be born is the realization of *God's* dream of saving us from our sinful selves. Matthew quotes Isaiah's words because he wants us to know that long-ago prophecy is fulfilled in this child.

And so we consider what would have happened if Joseph—acting boldly on his dream—had not done something so dramatically different from what he had originally decided to do. What would have happened if Joseph had taken another course of action.

But Joseph *doesn't* take another course of action. Regardless of what people are saying, Joseph marries the mother. And he names the child. Joseph knows that at the very heart of God's law is love. And it's love that undergirds Joseph's actions. In Joseph's actions, in Joseph's loving

obedience, we see his faith. Faith is more visible in what we do than in what we say.

Faith becomes visible in priorities and in commitment. Joseph's story invites you and me to be not-so-much concerned about what others say. To be not-so-much influenced by what others say. Joseph's story invites you and me to commit ourselves to listening to and heeding and acting upon the word of God who speaks through sacred Scripture and through God's messengers and yes, even through dreams. Listening to and heeding and acting upon the word of the One who guides us dreamers on our journey. Joseph dares to keep on dreaming and dares to keep obeying—following the path on which he's sent.

Joseph models faith for us. Joseph shows us how to live faithfully—how to live into God's perfect will for this world God has made. Joseph shows us how to dream. And not only how to dream, but how to be *moved* by that dream to action that will transform this world in accordance with God's intention for it.

Deep in the season of Advent, we dream of the One whose desire is that the world be restored to its original goodness. We dream of the promised One. The One in whom we place our trust. We dream of the One whose name is Emmanuel—whose name is God-with-us.

For God-with-us means healing. God-with-us means strength. God-with-us means peace. God-with-us means forgiveness. God-with-us means redeeming love. God-with-us means joy. God-with-us means new and never-ending life as those who bear God's image and serve with glad hearts as we go about the tasks God calls us to do.

For God-with-us isn't just a dream. God-with-us is a dream come true! And God-with-us is more true, more real, and infinitely more enduring than this world's pain and sorrow, this world's conflict and brokenness. Because those are passing away. But God-with-us is always and forever.

And God-with-us is coming very soon. To be born, once again. Born for you. To be revealed in you.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.