

Matthew 2:13-23

The whole town lies dark and quiet, now, illuminated only by the stars overhead. The houseguests have departed. The gifts, generously offered and graciously received, have been unwrapped and set aside. The baby has been tucked in. The home has fallen into a deep, exhausted, dream-free slumber; except, of course, for the father of one particular baby. In Matthew's gospel, God communicates to Joseph through angelic messengers in dreams. Apparently, while the rest of the little town of Bethlehem was blissfully dreamless, Joseph was the exception. Miles away, in the palace of the present king, sleep, if it comes at all, must be fitful and perhaps filled with dreams as well; frightening dreams of insurrection, revolt and overthrow. Certainly, neither of them were experiencing "visions of sugarplums dancing."

Dreams can be powerful things. The word "dream" itself can be understood in a variety of ways. For instance, we might speak of dreams being our hopeful aspirations of how we would like our lives to be in the future. Or dreams might be more backwardly focused as fond memories, "dreaming of days gone by." Dreams can be delightful, playful, inspiring or in some cases, downright terrifying. For the author of the first gospel, dreams are a means of divine communication. This is not a new phenomenon. Scriptural accounts of God communicating through dreams appear as early as the 20th chapter of Genesis. Even in Job, Elihu tells Job and his friends, "For God speaks in one way, and in two, through people do not perceive it. In a dream...when deep sleep falls on mortals, while they slumber on their beds, THEN he opens their ears and terrifies them with warnings."¹

But, how did we end up here? What happened to the glad tidings, peace on earth and all the good will associated with the birth of "God with us?" How do you follow up the beautiful message of Christmas with the paranoid and anger-fueled killing of infants? Here, not even one day past our celebration, death threatens to overcome the frail new light of the world. But the shadow of death even hovered at the edges of our Nativity scenes, represented in the gifts of the Magi. Despite all the "Glorias" and angelic choruses, our Gospel text today finds the father, mother and our lauded but powerless baby king on the run, fearful, trying to escape a declared death sentence, hustled out under cover of darkness, on the heels of this silent, holy night. It finds the women of Bethlehem wailing and grieving the reckless killing of their sons.

For the Holy Family, this is no quick overnighter. Egypt, once a land of captivity from which God brought forth His chosen people, now becomes a place of refuge, a safe haven. Despite how Joseph was receiving his information, this was not a "dream" vacation. How nerve-wracking, too, to be told to "wait there until I tell

¹ Job 33.14-16

you." How do you plan for that? They were "on call," but completely disconnected from the news out of Jerusalem until they were on their way back. And to return and find the situation really not much better, possibly even worse than when they left and finally re-directed to the out of the way, backwater little town of Nazareth. Hardly an auspicious start for one so heralded, don't you think? Maybe we could fault the Magi for tipping Herod off. Yet, Joseph seems to take this all in stride, his actions indicating a certain and unwavering trust in the information he was receiving through his dreams. Salvation for Joseph and his family meant hearing and believing the word from God and then doing it.

Now, 2000 years later, things haven't changed much. Even today, the day after a bountiful, miraculous Christmas celebration, the horrors of genocide and the tyranny of empire are still very much with us. People suffer. Anger, pain, anxiety, and despair mar many lives. Children are hungry. Resources are not evenly distributed. All we have to do is scan the evening news to see just how much pain, suffering, and evil exist in our present age. Sin, distress, suffering and death are still a part of everyday life, locally, nationally, globally and personally. They do not observe the Christmas holiday by shutting down or turning off.

In a favorite carol, we sing, "The hopes and fears of ALL the years are met in thee tonight." What this text bears witness to is Jesus, the promised gift of salvation, being confronted with the deep sin and corruption of the world, a world yet to be fully renewed. Jesus, the "with us God," has been born into this very circumstance, not just 2000 years ago, but still this very day. Like the Magi and Herod, we have been made aware of the presence of the new king. The very thought of the birth of this baby is a threat to the stability of our self-appointed power. Like the Magi and Herod, we have the capacity to respond to this news in our own way. We may choose to come before our God and king with worshipful offerings, or we may opt to reject his lordship, terrified as Herod of what effect allowing this new king to reign will have on our lives. We resist and react to God's Word incarnate, sometimes in violent ways. Herod's reaction to the pronouncement of a new king of the Jews is an all-too human one: he attempts to neutralize any possibility of threat to his own power and control. The long-expected hope of God's people equally represents the most fearful incarnation for those with the ability to wreak havoc on other's lives in proportion to their access to power in this world.

Although Matthew's story of the Holy Family's spontaneous travels fits nice and neat together without this awkward, ugly disruption by Herod in verses 16-18, it helps us to see that God didn't wait until conditions were just right to set salvation on its path. You see, we already know how the story ends. Jesus, God with us, was born to die, but according to God's will, not Herod's. God takes on frail, vulnerable flesh and blood. Jesus' death at the ends of Herod's swords would not serve God's redemptive plan. God did not set-up the birth of a son only to ignore or abandon him, leaving things to chance, until making the necessary time. By fleeing to Egypt, Joseph and Mary did not act of their own accord in this matter; they were not just being overly protective parents. They responded faithfully to God's will, as received through Joseph's dreams. Now, I don't mean to suggest that every dream you or I have is a divine communication from God, to be acted

upon without discernment. But, we also cannot discount, as Elihu indicated, that God may wait until we are in a more amenable state to open our ears, when we cannot drown God out with the white noise of daily busy-ness, with Twitter and Facebook updates, Smart Phones, constantly streaming media or whatever else. Deliverance is God's responsibility, not ours. Like Joseph, we must decide how to respond to what we perceive to be God's plan, AND we must act. We will make wrong decisions, though, and so we return to the promise of God from the beginning to deliver us.

As I mentioned earlier, the word "dream" can be understood in a variety of ways, and the way Matthew used it to indicate divine communication. Matthew does not use this word of dream-warning again until the trial of Jesus before Pilate. In a communication from his wife to Pilate on his judgment seat, she indicates she has suffered greatly because of a dream about Jesus.² This time, though, Jesus will not be rescued, not hustled away from the worldly powers of sin and death. God's time to act had come, just as we celebrated God's coming in recent days, not just 2000 years ago. The "with us God" is with us through the Glorias and the sufferings, and he will not be denied. Even through the violence and threats, God does not shy away; Christmas still comes. I'd like to share an excerpt from a poem that addresses this very point:

Even now [Christmas] comes
 In the face of hatred and warring-
 No atrocity too terrible to stop it,
 No Herod strong enough,
 No hurt deep enough,
 No curse shocking enough,
 No disaster shattering enough
For someone on earth will see the star,
Someone will hear the angel voices,
Someone will run to Bethlehem,
Someone will know peace and goodwill:
The Christ will be born!³

The Christ HAS been born!
Amen.

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² Matt. 27:19

³ 'Christmas Comes,' Ann Weems, *Kneeling In Bethlehem*.