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Isaiah 10:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25
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Holy Dreams

There are many kinds of dreamers. Some dreamers escape from reality and responsibility through their dreams. They live with their heads in the clouds and their feet never touch ground. Their dreams never lead to anything of consequence. The creativity of other dreamers has led to new inventions, progress in science, expansion of social justice, improvement of public health, development of education and growth of industry. Dreamers are essential to life.

Joseph, the husband of Mary, comes from a long line of dreamers. He comes from a people whose common vocation it was to dream the dreams of God. Joseph is well-named. The first Joseph was the Hebrew patriarch whose capacity to dream and to interpret dreams saved Egypt and his whole family from starvation in a time of famine.

This second Joseph finds himself in a difficult situation. His dream arises out of his troubling circumstances. He is betrothed to a young girl named Mary. Before they have established their own home together, Joseph is scandalized to discover that Mary is pregnant. Matthew tells us that Joseph is “a righteous man.” According to the law, he could have had her stoned to death in front of her parents’ house. He could have sent her home in disgrace. Joseph’s sense of justice is tempered with mercy. He resolves to send her away quietly so as to minimize the gossip. He does not want to humiliate Mary and her family. Before he acts on his intentions, Joseph has a dream in which the angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him not to put her away, for the child within Mary is the gift of the Holy Spirit. He is to call the baby Jesus, which means “God saves,” for God will save the people through this child. The angel confirms the truth of the message by reminding Joseph of Isaiah’s prophecy that one day a virgin would conceive and bear a child whose name would be Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” In Jesus, God will be with the people to save them. When Joseph wakes from sleep he does as the angel commands and takes Mary to be his wife. When he names the baby Jesus, he confirms by his actions that this was a holy dream. A holy dream is a dream that connects human events with the actions of God.

All of us have moments when, either waking or sleeping, we have some intuition, some vision, some dream of what God wants for our lives and for those with whom we live. How do we know which of these dreams are holy dreams and which arise from the vain imagination of our own hearts or the selfish desires of our own schemes? From the beginning of Israel’s life, people have been led astray by false prophets. Even Jesus warned that many would come in his name desiring that others follow their foolish lead. False religious leaders have come with bizarre and destructive dreams. Many movements like James Jones’s “People’s Temple,” David Koresh’s “Branch Davidians” and Marshall Applewhite’s “Heaven’s Gate” have led gullible people to their death. The religious dreams of various faiths, when joined with political power, have led to times of intolerance and violence like the crusades, the inquisition, jihad, terrorism, holocaust, apartheid and racial oppression. In spite of the abuses of religious vision, there are holy dreams that give hope to human life, that care for creation, that motivate people to acts of compassion and justice and open human hearts to the work of God’s Spirit.

How do we know that the dreams we dream are holy and the good we seek to do serves God’s purposes? It is Joseph’s encounter with the angel of God that gives us the guidance to test our own dreams to see if they are of God. In this story are four keys to the truth.

First, Matthew tells us that Joseph is a righteous man. This means that Joseph is a man who worships God faithfully and keeps the law. He lives his life in harmony with God and with his neighbor. The dream comes to him in the context of life lived in the presence of God. The theologian John Leith often said that we are far more likely to come under the influence of the work of God’s Spirit if we are vitally connected with the life of faith in the church. This means being engaged in worship, in the study of scripture and the service of others. The life of faith is a disciplined life. There are no short cuts to spiritual wisdom. Over a lifetime, Joseph has learned that righteousness is about the practice of mercy.

In the small country church we served in our first call, one of the most important things we learned was that the most spiritual people were not the ones who could quote scripture but were quick to condemn others, but the ones who often quiet about their faith but quick to forgive and to practice compassion. These were the people who had real dreams about how the church could be a community of spiritual nurture, genuine welcome and humble service. Holy dreams arise in the disciplined practice of faith.

Secondly, Matthew tells us that the angel comes to Joseph. It is not something that he makes up on his own. Isn't that how our best ideas come to us? Sometimes what we read, see or experience inspires us. How many times has someone challenged you to think in ways that are fresh and new? The angel suggests to Joseph that he do something he has not, until that moment, even considered doing. The angel says that he should take Mary to be his wife. When we are given an idea, it may take time for the thought to take root in us. Then, other people come along and fertilize the idea and cause it to grow. We can test the idea to see if it makes sense of what we have always known to be true about God. This is why the angel reminds Joseph of the ancient prophecy about Emmanuel. What God is doing through Mary will fulfill what God promised through Isaiah. One of the ways in which religious cults go wrong is that they are not in line with the central teaching of scripture. Religious fanatics get off track and distort the truth and miss the essential message of God's redemptive love.

Over the past few years, we have seen the renewal of Westminster Neighborhood Ministries. Supported by volunteers from Second, this vital ministry provides an after-school and summer program for children who are at risk, houses a food bank, hosts a soup kitchen and offers legal aid. As you have heard me say, the ministry is opening a free pre-school so that we can help very young children get a good start. The hope is that we would have a positive relationship with these children and their families throughout their school career. I have been pondering how we can make a significant difference in these children's lives by helping them succeed in school and even attend college. Not long after I began to have these thoughts, one of our elders who is deeply involved in the ministry at Westminster said to me, "I think we should offer college scholarships to any of the youth at Westminster who complete our program and graduate from high school." Out of the blue, his words confirmed what I had been thinking. Now I know this dream is a dream of God.

The third key to discerning holy dreams is that such dreams push us in directions we may be uncomfortable going. When the angel tells Joseph to take the pregnant Mary to be his wife, it is a new and difficult step for him to take. He is willing to accept whatever criticism, whatever malicious gossip or whatever public scorn he might encounter because he believes it is the will of God. God's plans push us to step out of our comfort zone and into a new world.

I remember a woman in a church I served who opened her heart and her home to everyone. She lived in a small town where the main business was keeping up with everyone else's business. In defiance of the social norms of the community, she reached out as a friend to another woman who was looked down upon with disapproval by just about everybody in town. Because of the love that God has put in her heart, she was willing to take heat that good folks can generate simply by flapping their jaws.

Just last week, someone who is deeply involved in a ministry with the homeless told me that she went to participate in a one-day service event and had no idea she would be hooked. Getting involved in such a ministry was the last thing on her mind. Now, she gives sacrificially of her time and resources helping others whose life experiences are so different from her own. Maybe God is calling you to do something as simple, yet as difficult as forgiving someone who has hurt you and whom you have cut out of your life. When we go, in spite of all of our objections, to those people God wants us to meet and to those places where God sends us, we can be pretty sure we are following a holy dream.

The last key is the most obvious. A holy dream brings blessing and benefit to others. The holy dream is given to Joseph to bring about the salvation of the world. The angel reminds Joseph of the ancient prophecy that a child will be born who will represent the presence of God with the people. Holy dreams bring life, hope and healing to people. Tom Cousins is a Presbyterian Elder and developer in Atlanta whose holy dream brought about the total transformation of East Lake, one of the worst and most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the city. He worked with the housing authority, neighborhood and business leaders and school officials to forge a common dream of a new community free of crime with a safe, outstanding

school and even a public golf course where the children can learn life skills and build self esteem through golf. In East Lake, these dreams have brought new hope to a once desperate community.

One of the reasons I am so excited about our plans for greater mission and outreach as a congregation for 2008 is that I believe these are holy dreams. Through the vision and commitment of this congregation, we are raising our level of support for global and local mission by as much as \$330,000 per year. Through gifts of time and resources, we will be supporting the Mother Child Hospital in Eldoret, Kenya, the Umoja project with children and their families impacted by AIDS, Camp Pyoca's capital campaign, the development of a local Hispanic congregation, support for PCUSA missionaries and mission partnerships with members of our own congregation, the Samaritan Fund of the Center for Family Life Ministries, and greater support for Westminster Neighborhood Ministries. Like Joseph's dream, these ministries have arisen out of the spiritual life of the church, the dreams of others that have come to us, the willingness of many to take risks and the desire to be a blessing to our sisters and brothers.

We, like Joseph, stand in a long line of dreamers. May we always be willing to dream the dreams of God. Such dreams will change the world.