

More Than A Dream

Matthew 1:18-25
December 23, 2007

I.

We're finishing the season of Advent this morning. The fourth candle is lit, and during this time we heard about the second coming and John the Baptist. Now we're approaching the time of celebrating Christ's birth, which we will do at our services tomorrow evening and Tuesday as the Christmas season begins.

If you come to the 10:00 o'clock service later this morning you won't hear this sermon, but will see Part One of a Christmas play by our Amazing Praisers drama group that includes a reenactment of today's Gospel reading. Part Two of the play, which depicts the birth of Christ, will be presented at the 5:00 o'clock service on Monday, with a regular sermon at 10:00 o'clock. So, you have a choice.

Today, however, we go back about six months before Jesus' birth to the drama involving Mary and Joseph. Part of it is in the Gospel of Matthew, and part is in the Gospel of Luke.

Let's refresh our memories about the background. The angel Gabriel told Mary she was going to give birth to our Lord and Savior. He explained that even though Mary was a virgin, she miraculously would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:26-38). This, of course, was not difficult for God to accomplish. If he could create the universe in an instant, he certainly could cause Mary to become pregnant.

Now, here's where it gets even more interesting. During this time Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, but she did not tell him what the angel said, or that she was pregnant. Instead she went off to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who at that time also was miraculously pregnant with a son who eventually would be John the Baptist. Scripture tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home (Lk. 1:56).

II.

At this point we pick up on today's reading. It says that Mary was found to be with child, but it probably was not a startling discovery or some sort of dramatic confession. By that time, after three months, her pregnancy could be apparent.

And we need to understand two things about Jewish laws and practices of the times, both of which were substantially different from our own.

First, couples who were engaged to be married did not hang around with each other as is the case today. Marriages at time often were arranged through families or third parties, and strict formalities were observed about everything that happened before the wedding. It would have been very unseemly for Mary and Joseph to have gone to a play or a restaurant together.

That's probably why Joseph was not aware of the angel Gabriel's revelation to Mary. And Joseph also probably heard through the grapevine that she was pregnant.

It wouldn't work that way today, would it? If a young man found that his fiancé was pregnant and he knew he was not the father, you probably would expect some sort of confrontation. And the young woman, if she had an explanation, probably would give it. But according to the customs of the times. Mary and Joseph did not yet associate with each other, and so Joseph was left to figure this out for himself.

The second big difference between Jewish culture then and our culture now was that an engagement at that time was just as serious and just as binding as a marriage. Even though the parties did not yet live together, the obligations they had to each other were the same. There was no distinction between adultery during the period of engagement, and adultery during marriage. And ending an engagement was as serious as ending a marriage.

So, Joseph was in a bind, wasn't he? He thought Mary had been unfaithful and that everyone in the village knew it. The only thing he could do, it seemed, was to quietly break off the engagement so they could go their own ways. All of his dreams of a life together with the woman he loved, and his hopes for a family, were on the verge of going down the drain.

III.

So, what happened next? Joseph had a dream about an angel who said it was OK to take Mary as his wife because she still was a virgin and the baby had miraculously been conceived by the Holy Spirit. The angel also said that Mary's baby would save people from their sins for all time.

Wow! What a dream! Would a modern day Joseph believe this? Consider a young couple today who are planning to get married. And assume again that the woman turns up pregnant, and the man knows he is not the father. And what if he went to bed, turned out the light, and had a dream like that described in today's Gospel? How many young men today would wake up the next morning totally convinced that his fiancé had done no wrong and that everything was all right?

Yet, that is exactly what Joseph did. He eventually took Mary as his wife, let everyone in the community think he was the baby's father, and helped raise Jesus as a child.

Joseph's dream thoroughly convinced him to step out in faith, and he did it under social and cultural circumstances that were much more difficult than similar circumstances would be today.

And that's why Joseph's dream was more than just a dream. Joseph was touched by the Word of God, and he found it to be an overpowering and compelling force. This did not come from the subconscious mind, as dreams often do. This was God's Word to Joseph in a dream when he was asleep, but it just as easily could have come in a vision or moment of revelation while he was awake.

And remember, this was not a situation within the everyday joys and sorrows of life where God's Word could be placed in the context of familiar things. This was an entirely unprecedented event. And even though Old Testament prophecies pointed toward the Messiah, it was not until Jesus began teaching as a young man that these prophecies began to be more fully understood.

So, in Joseph's time, what he did was truly a leap of faith. It is one of the classic examples in the Bible of the blessings that flow from obedience and honoring God

IV.

Many of us have been in similar situations where we know with certainty that God has spoken to us. And if any of us think we have not, don't be so sure that it hasn't happened anyway. God is there in all those times when we call upon him. All we have to do is listen.

I have been in small group sessions where people sat around tables and discussed these types of experiences in their own lives. They were encouraged to talk about themselves, and it was not considered impolite or self-centered to do so. They shared times when they were touched by God's grace through the Holy Spirit. The sessions also included prayer, meditation, and music to help people center themselves. I would like to do something like that next year at St. Thomas.

And in these sessions two things commonly occurred. First, some people were a little hesitant to describe an occurrence in their lives they could attribute to the voice of God. Perhaps it was not as dramatic as Joseph's dream. Perhaps it was not a flash bang thing. They were not sure.

Second, as the sessions progressed, and as others came forth with their own experiences, some of those who initially were hesitant began to understand that indeed the guidance of the Holy Spirit had been present with them in the past. They began to have a better sense of how God might have been working in their lives. It was there after all.

But thinking about God in our lives in this way also presents was a danger. We must be careful about transferring Joseph's experience to ourselves. Most of God's communication with us probably is not through dreams or the appearance of angels. Obviously, the ways in which Joseph and Mary experienced God do not mean that we should expect the same.

Of course, in the larger sense, God communicated with all of us by appearing in human form in Jesus Christ, and thus we know God by knowing Christ. But still, as we think about God more specifically in our lives, we cannot always see a parallel between our lives and some of the more dramatic parts appearances of God in Scripture.

But God is with us nonetheless. People sometimes talk of knowing God through intuition, a sense of compulsion, a silent revelation, or perhaps a small still voice. These experiences might come from prayer, reading Scripture, and sharing with each other as in the sessions I described earlier. They might come when you don't expect it. God relates to us in many different ways. Do not worry if angels have not visited you or appeared in your dreams.

There are two points here. The first is apparent from today's reading, and is that as Joseph became aware of God's will for him, he did what God wanted him to do. I pray that the same is true for us, even though God may appear in our lives in less dramatic ways. The second point is that we need not wait for God to take the initiative. Communication with him is a two way street, and there are many ways in which we can experience God. I hope you feel that coming here to church this morning is one of those ways.

V.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible about God's voice is in the Old Testament and the calling of Samuel to be a prophet. On two occasions the Lord spoke to young Samuel but Samuel did not understand what was happening. Samuel went to Eli, an old priest who was supervising Samuel's training, and Eli told Samuel what to do.

So the third time the Lord called, Samuel said "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sa. 3:10). How often do we do just the opposite? How often do we say "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking"? How often do we pray in the sending mode rather than the receiving mode?

Now, there is nothing wrong with speaking to God, for he calls us to do so. It is necessary that we do that. But he also calls us to listen, and part of developing a relationship with him is sensing when to do which. Today's reading illustrates the importance of hearing, and the importance of not letting our fears and concerns drown out God's voice as the Holy Spirit reveals it to us.

So, as we prepare for Christmas and the celebration of Christ's birth, and as we thank God for the gift of salvation and praise him for his grace, let us also remember to listen and to be ready to inwardly hear God's voice, and to do his will for us. *Amen.*