

Sermon, St. David's, 12/18/22, Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Our two Sundays of John the Baptist are over and now on the final Sunday of Advent it's finally Mary's turn. But, every three years we get this story from Joseph's perspective, and that's a little different. Like Mary, an angel comes to him, but in his case the angel comes after Joseph's fiancée is inexplicably pregnant. In Luke's Gospel, an angel comes to Mary and tells her something is about to happen. For Joseph, the angel shows up after this has already happened. Mary gets to consent to how her life is going to change. Joseph only gets to manage his response.

Doesn't that make Joseph relatable, though? It does to me. I have learned to love Mary passionately over the years, but I've never known a pregnant virgin. But I know lots of people who end up in a situation they did not choose who have to figure out how they will respond. How they will react to the hand they've been dealt. How will we go on after a loved one has died? How will we approach Christmas after a job loss?

Another difference between Joseph's encounter with an angel and Mary's encounter is that with Joseph, the angel showed up in a dream. Then in the next chapter, Joseph learns things in dreams three more times: first, that he needs to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt due to Herod wanting to kill the baby. The Holy Family stayed in Egypt until Herod's death, when an angel of the Lord again appeared to Joseph in a dream to tell him they could return to Israel because those who were trying to kill baby Jesus were now dead themselves. Then they end up in Galilee, again because of a warning in a dream. And Joseph was not the only one making decisions based on dreams: after encountering Jesus, the magi returned to their own country by another route because they had been warned in a dream.

What do you think about all that dreaming? Have you ever felt that you were visited in a dream? I did, once, a long time ago, back when I was in my mid-twenties not paying any attention to God at all. If you had asked me about my religious beliefs back then, I would have told you that I didn't know what I believed.

One night I had a dream and realized that I did still believe in God, and that I was not living a life worthy of God. But that was a moment of repentance for me, of changing direction. That started me in the direction that led to a life of an ordained person, where I am thinking about God all the time.

But sometimes I wonder why I don't hear from God more in my dreams. Like Joseph.

Or like King Ahaz in our first reading today. God offered to give Ahaz a sign, and Ahaz claimed that he did not want to put God to the test. Don't be fooled by Ahaz's apparent piety. He didn't want a sign. He did not want to listen to God and was not willing to follow God. Instead of turning his life over to God, he turned it over to Assyria, taking on Assyrian gods as his own.

Isaiah said that the Lord was going to give a sign anyway, and we hear those famous Advent words about a child who shall be named Immanuel, which means God with us. We will gather here again on Christmas and hear more about this baby, this sign, that would change the world.

What would you say if God offered you a sign? What will you do if God comes to you in a dream?

Joseph does not have a speaking part in today's reading, and if you look at all of his appearances in the Gospels, you won't find any instances of him speaking. We know of his character from his actions. We know that the Lord came to him repeatedly in dreams. But we don't know anything that he actually *said*. With Mary, on the other hand, in Luke, we hear her consent to bear Jesus, and we hear the Magnificat, her response to her cousin Elizabeth, a subversive and powerful speech. Mary is an assertive, opinionated woman, according to the Bible.

Joseph, however, is silent. He is silent, and the holy comes to him in dreams, not once but four times.

What can we learn from Joseph? If we are quiet, will God come to us?

Many of us complain about how God does not come to us the way that God came to people in the Bible. But how would we react?

Would we be like Joseph: marrying someone and taking their child as our own? Moving several times because of what we learned in dreams?

Or would we be like Ahaz, falsely claiming that we wouldn't dream of asking God to do something for us?

God told Ahaz to ask for anything, as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven. Ahaz did not. Then the sign God sent was a woman with a baby. As Christmas approaches, we have Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus. We decorate our homes and churches with them now, but back then, would we have recognized such a humble family as a sign from God?

Are there signs from God around us right now that we fail to see?