Pregnant Dreams

A Meditation on Matthew 1: 18 - 25

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Bear with me for a minute, because I think I must have zoned out while I was reading the Gospel passage a moment ago. I thought we were going to hear the story of Jesus’ *birth*….(scan passage). Matthew says it right here: *“This is how the* ***birth*** *of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.” Etc., etc…Joseph named him Jesus.”* Something’s missing*…* I didn’t hear anything about the contractions being five minutes apart. Where were the back rubs and ice chips? There isn’t even any panting or cursing. **No grabbing of husbands’ beards when they bend down and breathe their oniony hamburger breath in your face in the middle of a contraction**…oops, sorry. Let me pull myself back together. That was *my* story…Apologies! Let’s get back to Matthew…No midwife or words of encouragement or blankets warmed by a fire to wrap a newborn baby. No tears. No laughter. No collective sighs of relief. We can search the text, but none of that is here. I’m sorry but, this is *not* a birth story, Matthew. Anyone who has witnessed a birth or given birth can tell you that undeniable truth. This is a *conception* story. It’s a breathtaking, beautiful story. A story that stops us in our tracks and asks, could you have been so brave? Let’s get one thing straight: this isn’t the account of Jesus’ *birth* no matter what Matthew might call it. If anyone were going to tell that story, it would be Mary. What we have is Joseph’s story, a story of dreams and critical choices, and what it means to be family.

Matthew gives us the pre-birth story, and it is a story of ego and fear of shame and fierce courage. It is the story of standing for what is right rather than what is “approved” by the eyes of the community. It is a story of risk-taking and faithfulness. And dreams. Crazy, holy dreams. A description that is fitting of almost any nighttime vision: from sweet dreams to nightmares, there is a holiness and a craziness in dreams that cries to us to pay attention.

A friend of mine, Laura Huff Hileman, a spiritual director and certified Dream Consultant, who understands dreams as a prayer language, describes them in this way on her website, Fire by Night: *Dreams flow from the depth of your inborn holiness to your purposeful, thinking mind.  They help you come into alignment between your ego and your Source. Full of wisdom, tough love, and humor, dreams can help you discern your next steps and integrate all aspects of yourself into wholeness.* I think Joseph would agree with that description. His dream of an angel visitation - complete with tough love - empowered him to take compassionate, wise, grace-filled next steps.

I love God’s humorous and insightful way of bringing news to Joseph and Mary; news delivered in individual ways. If you’ve been pregnant or been around a pregnant woman, you probably have heard about *their* dreams. Pregnancy is a time when dreams seem to be especially vivid, dynamic and wild. The months of restless sleep make it easier to remember dreams that otherwise might have been lost. If an angel had come to Mary in a dream, she might have been easily dismissed …She might have shared her dream of Gabriel’s shocking news only to have another women say, “One angel?? Honey, I’ve seen a whole flock and they were all patting me on the shoulder and telling me that one day my back wouldn’t hurt, my feet wouldn’t swell, and best of all, they said that one day I would sleep through the night! Just wait until you have a baby and you’ll understand what a glorious promise that is!” Gabriel *had to* appear in person – (do you say “in person” about an angel??) to Mary. A dream would never have worked.

But Joseph? For Joseph a dream was just the ticket. Joseph would have known the stories of other dreamers. He would have known of God’s nighttime visit to Abram: Abram, who despaired of ever having a son of his own. Yet, God came to him in a dream, and walked with him out into the darkness to do a little sky watching. “Can you count the stars?” God asked Abram. “Look at the stars and hear my promise to you: your descendants will out-number this vast array!” (Gen. 15) An aging man was given hope, and each night he could look to the sky and remember God’s promise.

Joseph would also remember Jacob. Jacob dreamed of a ladder to heaven, and as God’s messengers climbed between heaven and earth, he heard God say, “Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. **15**I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go. (Gen. 28) Even as Jacob would later face what he feared would be a devastating reunion with the brother he had tricked so long ago, he would discover that God was present to heal, to restore and to reunite a family.

And what about another Joseph? Joseph, the dreamer from Genesis. Joseph the favorite son of his father Jacob. That Joseph had visions of his own greatness, his brothers and even his own father bowing down to him. His boasts about those dreams would lead to his enslavement in Egypt, but his belief that God was the source of his dreams, would bring about his restitution. Eventually, Joseph, after suffering multiple injustices, would bring salvation to his community and his family. Dreams would provide a foundation for reunion. Dreams would once again lead to life.

When Matthew tells us that Mary’s fiancé, Joseph, has been given a dream from God, a message to stand beside Mary, despite the cost, we are invited to remember the dreamers who have come before him. We are invited to remember and have faith that

God’s promises are true. Dreams are the very place where God’s vision is born, that liminal space in which we can believe that miracles are possible. By speaking to Joseph in a dream, God places Joseph alongside other dreamers and this lends a credibility to the message that Joseph desperately needs. That Abram became a father was nothing short of a miracle. That Jacob & Esau were reunited was a miracle. That the Joseph of the Genesis story could be restored to his fractured family and forgiveness could abound is a miracle. Now, Matthew’s Joseph is faced with a situation which is beyond his comprehension, beyond his ability to navigate. His solution to what appears to be his fiancé’s betrayal is a quiet exit. Make as little noise as possible, draw as little attention to the situation as possible. Pray and trust that Mary’s family would protect her and care for her as she carried someone else’s baby.

Into this chaos, God speaks to Joseph through a dream that confirms everything Mary had said. Who knows what Joseph really believed, how tangled his thoughts? And we must remember that while this is compressed into a few brief verses for us, Joseph’s decision had months in which to unfold. Maybe he didn’t make his final decision until Mary returned from Elizabeth’s home, just beginning to show, and laughing about Zachariah’s situation. She would have gone on to explain to Joseph that the high priest could not give a spoken blessing to the people because God had left him mute. Mute!! After a dramatic pause, she would have continued: Zachariah didn’t believe the angel that came to tell him that he and Elizabeth would have a child after all those years of waiting! You should see him, writing little messages and pantomiming his questions for us. Maybe this was the message that Joseph needed to break down his last defense. Maybe he was afraid not to listen to an angel! If God could make Zachariah mute, what might he do to Joseph?? Whatever the reason, or combination of reasons, we know that Joseph acted on faith and stayed with Mary. In the end he chose to ignore the gossip. He chose to ignore the doubters, the critics, the naysayers.

Theologian Susan Andrews writes, “dreams are the way God frees us and rebirths us and pushes us into new life.” (Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 1) She points us to Walter Brueggemann, who says that “all the dreams in Scripture have something in common. They represent the intrusion of God into a settled world – an unbidden communication in the dark of the night that opens sleepers to a world different from the one they inhabit during the day-an intrusion that generates a restless uneasiness with the way things are until the vision and the dream come to fruition.”

These dreamers Andrews writes, “discover purpose. They discover a promise. They discover a passion to live life for someone and something beyond themselves.”

What about you? Have you found that passion? How might God be speaking to you: in dreams, in conversations, in the mysterious life of another? How is God inviting you to be part of God’s dream? There is so much Joseph might have missed. He might have missed comforting his son during a storm or walking him out on a starry night to gaze at the sky. He might have missed showing him how to swing a hammer without smashing his thumb or how to transform a chunk of wood or stone into something purposeful. He might have missed bedtime kisses and good morning hugs. He might have missed the opportunity to look into the eyes of God. Think of that. That is not something that any of us can risk.

Let us give thanks to God, the risk-taker, meeting us where we are, in dreams and visions and the voices of those who love us. Let us give thanks to God, in whom we live and move and have our very being. Amen.