

Dreaming God's Dream—Matthew 1: 18-25 (December 22, 2019—4th Sunday in Advent)

Everybody is looking for a bargain this time of year or at least the appearance of a bargain. I see where some stores are holding “Boxing Week” sales before Christmas even happens. Well let me tell you about the great 2 for 1 bargain you get with scripture. Every time you read or listen to scripture, you are actually getting two stories. You are getting the story at face value, the words that are actually on the page but you are also getting a story about the person who wrote the story and the community for which they are writing. But, isn't that the case with every story, you hear two people tell the same story and they will each tell it differently, leaving some things out and emphasizing others. Sometimes that's just a function of memory but at other times, what they decide to leave out and emphasize says something about them, about what's important to them and what's not. This week I want to look at the story of Joseph and his dream through that lens, to focus on the story that is being told about Matthew and his community.

Only Matthew and Luke say anything about Jesus' birth and then only Matthew emphasizes Joseph's role and his dilemma over Mary's pregnancy. Only Matthew tells us about Joseph's dream. Only Matthew tells us that Joseph was torn apart over the demands of law and custom on the one hand and the pull of love on the other. He loved Mary, they were engaged but then she tells him she is pregnant, by the Holy Spirit nonetheless! It's more than he can bear. He knows what the law says, that if he makes a big stink over her presumed infidelity she could be killed. So he decides on a middle path, he will dismiss her quietly. Out of love he will not have her condemned, but from a sense of duty and following the law he will not marry her either.

Some scholars believe that the uniqueness of this story in Matthew's gospel points to a specific concern in Matthew's community, namely what do you do when the call to love comes up against the demands of the law and custom? Most scholars believe Matthew's community was composed of mostly Jewish followers of Jesus, they had been raised to revere the law as set out in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures) and interpreted by their leaders. But they followed a man, Jesus who had been executed by that same law and who often put the command to love ahead of human laws and customs.¹

This tension points to a great spiritual truth; God, for the sake of love often calls us to support the unconventional, the unorthodox and sometimes, even the illegal. I wonder about Greta Thunberg's parents who were far from being climate activists when Greta began her strikes for climate justice.² I'm sure this is not what they imagined for their daughter or themselves. The same goes for young Autumn Peltier from Wikwemikong First Nation on Manitoulin Island who has dedicated so much of her young life to advocating for access to clean, safe drinking water. I think of the inequality fuelled protests in Lebanon, Chile, and Ecuador. The protests and violence in Hong Kong fuelled by a yearning for democracy and the hopelessness that this will not be. I think of the spouse who supports their partner in quitting a job and going back to school or opening a business. I think of the parent who supports their child in expressing their gender identity publicly, at school, at family gatherings. For the sake of love sometimes we are called to

¹M. Eugene Boring, *Commentary on Matthew*, New Interpreter's Bible series.

²<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49918719>

support the unconventional, the unorthodox and sometimes even, the illegal. Sometimes like Joseph, for the sake of love we are called to believe in people when it seems like the craziest thing in the world to do.

Along with that call comes fear. Fear is a very human response because the Spirit calls us to meet the moment in faith, and faith means trust, and trust means we don't have all the answers. We will always lack certainty and security when we respond to life in faith. The late great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once talked about an experience of walking up a mountain trail in a dense fog and how afraid he was seeing only far enough to take the next step. That's what faith is like he said, having just enough vision for the next step.

Because fear is a natural reaction to God's call to love, fear can be a sign that God is calling. It's important to pay attention to the fear, not to let it overwhelm us and to run from what is being asked of us. Rather, we are called to sit with the fear and discern "Is there really a danger here that I need to avoid or am I reacting because I am being called, for the sake of love to do or support something unconventional, unorthodox or perhaps even illegal?" From my own experience and study here are some ways to tell whether fear is God calling or not.

- Mixed in with the fear is a sense of **hope**. We get a glimpse of new possibilities, new beginnings, new ways of being that respond in love and compassion to what is happening in our lives and/or our world.
- We feel that we are being asked to **participate in something that is greater than ourselves**. Our lives, our talents, our skills, our passions are being used for something more than just our own immediate gratification. There is a sense of **purpose** and **meaning** about our lives. Yet, what is being asked of us is **not about building up or defending our egos but rather about service** to others, to creation. Involving us in God's work of **healing**.
- The call to love always leads us into **deeper relationships with others**. God's call connects us with others, forms us into community, especially with those who are different from us. God's call leads us into relationships that are based on respect and compassion.
- The call to love always leaves us with a sense of deep **integrity**, with the confidence that we aren't being swayed by other agendas but rather we are being true to ourselves, to what God means us to do and be, to the good news proclaimed by Jesus.
- The call to love challenges us to **grow in faith**, to trust God in ways we might not have before.
- When we respond to the call to love something lifts from us, we **feel lighter, liberated, there is a sense of freedom**. Our life is governed not by the burdens of shoulds and oughts but rather by a sense of **possibility** for what might be.

Joseph's instructions from the angel are clear, "do not be afraid." It's the first thing the angel says. Love isn't possible when there is fear. Perhaps that's the message for Matthew's community and for us as well; don't be afraid to step into the unconventional, the unorthodox, and sometimes even the illegal if that's where love is calling you. In the words of the poet, "we

are all called to be instruments through which the melody of God takes shape. Through our lives God's love seeks to dance and make music for the world.”³ Our Advent Journey continues. We're almost there.

³ Joyce Rupp, *May I Have this Dance*, Ave Maria Press, 2007.