

**Matthew 1: 18 - 25    Surprise #4 - Dreams of the Heart**

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Have you ever seen a Christmas play where Joseph was the lead?

When you look at nativity scenes, or crèches, is Joseph ever the centre of attention?

How many sermons have you heard that have made Joseph the central focus of the story, rather than Jesus, or Mary, or the Holy Spirit?

Today we are celebrating the fourth, and final, Sunday of our journey through Advent; our journey towards Bethlehem. Today's reflection is titled: Surprise #4 because we may have already had three surprises this Advent season. Today is about a dream that Joseph had, and how God worked through Joseph. He had a dream of the heart.

On the first Sunday of Advent we read a story about Mary being surprised that the angel Gabriel told her that she was to bear a child, and we learned that with God, nothing is impossible.

On the second Sunday of Advent we read about Elizabeth, an older woman who was surprised that she too was pregnant, and that her son would become a person that we know as "John the Baptist." We heard that all of us have an important role in God's mission in God's world. John's mission was to be a forerunner for Jesus.

Last Sunday the Gospel story began with the birth of John, and ended with the familiar story of the birth of Jesus. In between there was a speech by Zechariah, John's father, a priest in the temple at Jerusalem. We heard that there is an active role for prophets, and a need for prophecy in God's world.

This week we will focus on Joseph, not Jesus. Joseph had a dream of the heart; a dream that is consistent with the dreams of people who participate in God's story. God often works and reveals Gods-self through DREAMS.

This Joseph, it seems, has only a walk-on role in the Gospel story. He appears only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and his is a non-speaking role. He doesn't say a word, and only his actions are described by the authors of the Gospels.

For those who wish to engage in a study of the Bible, there is an intriguing question about Joseph. In both Matthew and Luke, there is a genealogy of Joseph. He can trace his roots back to the greatest of the kings of Israel, King David. Royal blood flows in Joseph's veins. This is often taken to illustrate the fact that Jesus, as the son of Joseph, is a descendant of a royal bloodline. AND YET... we know that Joseph is not the father of Jesus. A Bible study group can take the time to consider the question of why the authors of the gospel story have taken pains to illustrate Joseph's heritage.

Joseph had a dream - a dream of the heart!

An angel spoke to Joseph, telling him to take Mary as his wife, contrary to Joseph's plans. He had planned to end their engagement because Mary had told him that she was pregnant. As a result of the dream, Joseph changed his mind - surprise!

We know that this is not the first time that human beings have recognized God's will through a dream. In fact, *dreams of the heart are what drive this world forward!*

Dreams of the heart are not the dreams that we see as advertising pitches on TV. They are not the dreams that are promoted in commercials for lottery games, where the odds are stacked against people. They are not the dreams of those who promote financial wealth; or vacations in far-away places. They are not the dreams of those who would promote peace through the use of violence.

Dreamers abound in the Bible. Their stories are the stories that led another man named Joseph - and about whom Andrew Lloyd Webber has written an inspiring musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. It includes a song that says, "any dream will do".

In Matthew's story, Joseph has three dreams:

1. In one, God tells him to take Mary as his wife;
2. In a second dream an angel tells him to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt, as refugees<sup>1</sup>;
3. In the third dream, God tells Joseph that it is safe to return to Nazareth<sup>2</sup>.

We have seen the power of dreams of the heart in our own time.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:13

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 2: 19,20

**"I have a dream"** - Those are power-filled words for anyone alive in the final decades of the last century - and even now. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke the dream of his heart, and it moved the hearts of a generation<sup>3</sup>.

Desmond Tutu of South Africa dreamed that the church would be a prophetic presence in the struggle against the evils of apartheid. Like John the Baptist, but with humour, Tutu dreamed of a new society where all God's children might have the opportunity to participate; socially, politically and economically.

In our country one of the great dreamers was a Baptist minister by the name of Thomas Clement Douglas. Tommy Douglas dreamed that the people of Saskatchewan would not be without medical care when they needed it: that those who are healthy in our society would have the both the means and the goodness of heart to take care of those who require medical assistance.

We do not need to look far beyond our borders to see what powerful forces can do to resist dreams of the heart, such as universal medical care. Even here in Canada much is being done to undermine the universality of the system that we have created to bring medical care to everyone on the same basis; rich or poor; those who are young and those who are experienced in life; those who have millionaires mansions and those who live on the streets. That is a dream of the heart!

Joe Fiorito has been writing about the tragedy of a senior by the name of Al Gosling who was evicted from his home by Toronto Community Housing - our public housing - and who died as a result. Can we not dream of a nation where everyone has a safe place to call home?

Other dreams of the heart have to do with providing sufficient income for all people so that complex welfare bureaucracies are not required.

You may have read the story of Linda Chamberlain in The Toronto Star this week.<sup>4</sup> Linda, due to the complex rules and regulations of a government bureaucracy that is mistakenly called, "Ontario Works", has found herself in the position of being in debt to the Government simply "because she earned more than welfare bureaucrats estimated she would", according to Carol Goar of The Toronto Star.

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Washington - Lincoln Memorial, August 28, 1963

<sup>4</sup> Carol Goar's column, published Wednesday, December 16; "Punished for working too diligently"

This week in Copenhagen there has been a division over how to implement an agreement to limit the emission of greenhouse gasses. The governments of rich nations - like ours - have resisted the dream of a world where we take care of each other and we take positive steps towards reducing the amount of greenhouse gasses that are in the atmosphere. There were people in Copenhagen who had dreams of the heart - and some of them were dragged off to jail for being so passionate.

What the leadership of the Empire has delivered to us is an acknowledgement that there is a crisis, and they have signed a non-binding agreement that allows nations to do something; whatever they wish, whenever they wish. NOT my definition of a dream - it is more like a nightmare. This is not a way to make God's world a better place for everyone, and all creatures.

God spoke to Joseph in a dream. It was a dream of the heart.

That dream continued through Jesus, and his followers. There are various ways of naming the dream of Jesus: The Kingdom of God, the Realm of God, etc. My preference is, "The World of God's Dreams."

We know that this would be a world of equity, of peace and justice. A world of harmony and abundance.

We take steps toward achieving that dream:

- when we dream of a guaranteed annual income for all Canadians;
- when we dream of adequate pensions so that none will be left in poverty
- when we dream of living more simply and in harmony with creation

These are dreams of the heart - the kind of dreams that Joseph encountered, and caused him to change his plans for life. God works through the dreams that we have in life, for it is through dreams of the heart that we move to create the kind of world that God dreams about. Dreams are powerful - are you surprised?

"I have a dream" .....

Hymn # 38 - Angels We Have Heard on High