

Sermon: I Had a Dream

Scripture: Matthew 2:13-23

OPENING LINE: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts; let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

PRAYER of ADORATION:

Our God is an awesome God. He is kind, tenderhearted, and merciful. Our Father loves us with an everlasting love, and He is always concerned about our welfare. All that we need, He provides through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. God should always be revered and adored. He should have our utmost respect. Let us lift up our praises to the One who is the living God, our God who is our father. AMEN.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.” When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children: she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Are the three dreams that Joseph has after the magi depart good dreams or bad? It is tempting to interpret the first dream as a good dream because an angel appears to Joseph with an urgent message. Even so, the dream is a nightmare; Herod is out to kill the newborn child, and he has the authority and the means to do it and, furthermore, do it with impunity. That is a dream terrifying enough to make a human break into a cold sweat, to set the heart beating furiously, to constrict the breath, to make the whole-body quiver with the question: will we escape in time?

The infant has just received extravagant gifts from exotic visitors. The meaning of his birth, the promise of his life seemed in that bright and shining moment so momentous, so filled with hope, and now this nightmare. Joseph moves from promise to terror with the dreaming of one dream.

The nightmare does not end when Joseph awakes. There is a frenzy of activity; stuffing together whatever they have, walking down the street and out the gate onto the main road to get to Egypt as fast as possible, the child crying, the mother exhausted, Joseph’s heart clutching in his throat every time he sees a soldier. The nightmare does not end when they get to their place of refuge. It grows greater, spreading beyond Joseph and the new family, pervading the region they have left behind as the blood of baby children darkens the earth, and their inconsolable mothers set the land echoing with “Wailing and loud Lamentations” (v.18). How swiftly and how far we have traveled from Gold, frankincense, and myrrh” to the homes drenched with the blood of children because a tyrant fears any potential challenge to his power and authority! The intense

compression of Matthew's story, from the Magi to the slaughter in eighteen brief verses, reveals the truth of the human situation.

It shows us to be capable of a passionate desire to search for, to find, to adore, to lavish our gifts upon the gift of God, while with equal realism it portrays the massive weight of our uncompromising need to grace, not only in the human heart, but also in our systems of military and political power that repress our highest and holiest yearnings with brutal violence.

The next two dreams in the passage continue this oscillating pattern between hope and nightmare. The second dream is a dream of relief: Herod is dead, the tyrant out of the way, the immediate threat removed. The family can head home. Home! After dealing with a strange language and different food and customs and the ambiguous status of being refugees, if not illegal immigrants, they can go home, home to the food and the local talk and the neighborhoods that have become only more precious as they remembered them from far away.

No sooner do they arrive than the old nightmare returns. This time Joseph does not even have to dream it. Herod is gone, but Archelaus his son, a man who takes after his father's cruelty, is ruling over Judea.

Perhaps because of his experience with Herod, Joseph is immediately on edge and "afraid to go there" (v.22). His fear is confirmed by his third dream, so that he and the family head further north to Galilee. There will be no homecoming after all, no return to the old neighborhood

According to Matthew then, Jesus starts his childhood as a refugee: fleeing from Judea to Egypt, then briefly from Egypt to Judea, and finally from Judea to Galilee. Jesus' early childhood gives witness to the truth that Matthew will later have Jesus summarize in his own words: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nest; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20). The infant Jesus has nowhere to lay his head from the day he was born. The Holy Family is a refugee family.

It is custom in most homes and churches that set up manger scenes to take them down after Christmas and store them until the season returns the next year. Matthew's account of the Holy Family's trials suggest that this is wrong.

Perhaps we should put away the shepherds because they return to the fields, put away the Magi because they return to their distant home, but we should keep out Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Just the three of them all alone, facing the terrors of a brutal despot. No visitors. No sheltering barn. No cuddly looking sheep. No friendly oxen. Then we should move the Holy Family to another location in our church or our home. Perhaps to a window looking out on the larger world, the world where there is still violence and repression and terror, and where there are refugees fleeing, needing protection, human beings in whom the Christ is crying to us for protection.

Finally, having reviewed Joseph's nightmares, I ask you to imagine the dream You wish Joseph could have, the dream of a world where, instead of having to flee, the refugee family would find itself at last welcome and secure. Imagine what the Christmas carols would sound like if we brought that dream alive. How would "Silent Night, Holy Night" sound in our hearts if we had helped to create a world in which baby Jesus would never again be refugee Jesus?

Let Me Tell You a Story:

We might conclude the sermon by recalling an event that took place on Christmas Eve in the little Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria. A few days before Christmas, the parish organist informed the pastor that the aging church organ was broken and could not be fixed by mid-night services. The organist said he could play his guitar that night if the pastor thought that would be appropriate. The pastor agreed to the guitar music and added that he had written a simple poem that the musician might be able to set to music. So, that night in 1818, in St. Nicholas Church, the world heard in German for the first time "Silent Night". We still sing this simple, but very noble song many years later. The song captures well the spirit of this night. The appearance of Jesus went unnoticed by so many, but the shepherds noticed.

BENEDICTION:

As God protected the Messiah from the threat of death, so will God provide protection in our lives.

Faithfulness and trust in God will yield protective care. God will protect us in uncertain times and hide us in secret places. The Messiah was looked after, provided for, and placed in an environment where he could be nurtured and grow, even in the midst of dangerous and violent circumstances. God will do the same for us.

GO IN PEACE.