



First United Church of Oak Park

Dreams and Visions
Matthew 1:18-23
The Rev. John Edgerton
December 22, 2019

It was no sure thing that Jesus would be born safely, no sure thing that he would grow to adulthood, no sure thing that he would ever be able to begin his ministry, even. It is a chancy thing, this business of being a human being. And long before Jesus would ever restore the outcast or teach the grace planted in the heart of the law or confront the corrupt, before he was even born, his life and his future dangled by a thread. Time and again, Jesus' life very nearly swept up into disaster.

Jesus was raised in a loving home—he very nearly was raised as the child of an unmarried mother cast out and living in the streets in a society where such people simply didn't survive. Jesus spent his infancy living abroad in Egypt—he very nearly lost his life to vicious political violence as his home country heaved and writhed under regime change.

Jesus grew up in the sleepy town of Nazareth in Galilee; it was in the middle of nowhere, not next to the lake and not next to the river and not next to the sea and nowhere near the Temple. Jesus grew up somewhere he wouldn't be noticed; he very nearly lived on the outskirts of Jerusalem, at the feet of the capital where those who were seeking his life held their power.

It was no sure thing that Jesus would be born safely, no sure thing that he would grow to adulthood, no sure thing that he would ever be able to begin his ministry, even. It is a chancy thing, this business of being a human being. Time and again, Jesus' life very nearly swept up into disaster.

What was it that made the difference? What was it that in each of these cases steered Jesus safely past the precipice of disaster? Dreams. Nothing more substantial and tangible than the wispy stuff of dreams that start to slip out of our fingers as soon as we wake.

Joseph's dreams made all the difference in Jesus' life. Joseph knew his fiancée, Mary, was going to have a child, and that the child was not his. Joseph was about to do what he imagined was the decent thing to do and quietly send Mary off to some far-away place, there to live as a single mother. But then Joseph had a dream. An angel appeared to him and told him that the child was conceived from God's own being, and that this child Jesus would save his people from their sins. And when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel told him. He let a dream lead his life. Jesus very nearly grew up as the child of an unmarried mother cast out and living in the streets in a society where such people simply didn't survive. Instead, Jesus grew up in a stable household, an ordinary life—because of a dream.

After Jesus was born the king of Israel, King Herod the present king, began searching for the child in order to put him to death. And Herod very nearly had him; he knew where Jesus was born and when he was born and sent soldiers on a blood mission. But then Joseph had a dream. An angel again: flee to Egypt; soldiers are coming and they seek the life of the child! Again, Joseph let a dream lead his life. Jesus very nearly lost his life to vicious political violence as his home country heaved and writhed under regime change. Jesus and Mary and Joseph got out just ahead of the soldiers, living safely in exile in Egypt because of a dream.

Years passed, and Jesus still lived in Egypt. Hard to be the deliverer of the people of Israel if you don't live there. But then Joseph had a dream, an angel with the news the king who sought the child's life was dead. It was time to return to Israel. Another dream, another angel: do not return to Bethlehem, it is too dangerous, go to Nazareth instead. Again, Joseph lets dreams lead his life. Instead of growing up in Bethlehem, in the foothills of the capital where still the powerful were seeking his life, instead Jesus grew up a stranger and a transplant in a nowhere town on the other side of the country called Nazareth. Jesus had a quiet childhood because of a dream.

Over and over and over again, Joseph lets dreams lead his life. Each dream leads Joseph to make huge changes to his life, huge changes for his family. Each dream revealed the dangers that confronted Jesus' young life; each dream showed a slender path forward toward God's promise. Over and over, dreams led Jesus safely away from the precipice of disaster. Joseph's dreams. Joseph the dream reader, Joseph the dream-chaser, these dreams are his part in the story of salvation. These dreams are Joseph's calling. And these dreams, they always share two things in common.

These dreams reveal something true about the present and they point toward a better future. Always, dreams reveal something true about the present and they point toward a better future. Joseph's dreams fit this pattern each time. Present reality: the child is conceived from the Holy Spirit. Future Promise: someday he will save the people from their sins. Present reality: The king is seeking the child's life. Future promise: in Egypt the child will be safe. Joseph's dreams reveal something true about the present and they point toward a better future. Joseph understood this, and letting dreams lead his life was his calling. This was his calling: to be a dreamer, a dream chaser.

As Christians, we too are called to be dreamers, dream-chasers like Joseph. All of us. That is part of what it means to be people of God, we are, all of us, supposed to be like Joseph, to be dreamers. I don't mean to say that all of us will have strange night visions that lead our lives. God is not so very predictable as all that. I mean that like Joseph and his dreams we are supposed to see clearly the truth about the present, and yet still move toward a better future.

As a Christian, I must look at reality clearly. I cannot shut my eyes or plug my ears against things I wish were not the case. If I follow the God of truth I cannot pretend as if the world is different than it is, for that is mere fantasy. But neither am I free to pretend that the way things are now is the way things will always be. For that is despair, and despair, too, is a kind of terrible fantasy. As a Christian, I must always live my life seeking to move toward a better future.

As a follower of God I am called, we are all of us called, to be dreamers, like Joseph. Dream chasers who see clearly the truth about the present day and yet still move toward a better future.

Dreams like that, life-saving world shaping dreams like those that led Joseph from death to life, well those kinds of dreams happen all the time. From bankers to teachers to drivers to parents to widows to preachers to pundits to everyone. Every person who has ever gotten sober is a dreamer; every person who ever got sober was able to see truly that their life was leading down to death, but that a new life was yet still possible. Dreams.

Every person who ever began laying plans to leave an abusive partner is a dreamer. They were able to see that they did not deserve to be treated as they were, and that a different way of being alive was still open to them.

Every person who has decided to become a parent is a dreamer; able to see the challenges and dangers of welcoming a child into their lives, and willing also to depart from the path of life as they have known it and walk instead a new path, with new companions not yet known beyond what is held in beloved imaginings.

Every person who has ever come out of the closet is a dreamer; able to see clearly the love that God has knit into their bones, and though it means risking much, being willing also to walk in the light of truth.

You, child of God, remember Joseph the dreamer. You, child of God, let dreams lead your life. Dreams, which is to see clearly the truth about the present day and yet still move toward a better future. Let dreams lead your life. You never know where it will lead.