

Advent 4 2013. Matthew's story of Jesus' birth. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Joseph "went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Whoops! That's Luke's account, which we'll hear next week! But wait – it's different! Matthew has so little detail compared to Luke. What we're used to hearing is the story we get every Christmas Eve (or, for the hardy who venture out, every Christmas Day!). That's the story about a homeless couple seeking shelter as the woman is going into labor. There's no manger, or cattle lowing, or shepherds in the fields, or angels announcing good news and praising God.

At least Matthew has the Wise Men! Though we have to wait a while - to Epiphany – to hear that part of the story.

And there's Joseph – today's story centers on Dreamer Joseph. No, not the one with the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, but the one who learned about justice and inclusion and love and compassion in his dream – after all, if God can choose an un-wed, pregnant teenager to be the vehicle of the Holy it says some pretty remarkable things about who's important in the Divine economy – not kings and princes, that's for sure. Or, rather, not only kings and princes. If you start at the bottom then every one's included.

Out of that dream Joseph went ahead with the marriage. Now this is pretty remarkable! Here we have a Mediterranean peasant living in a tiny village – perhaps 30 dwellings. Everyone knew everyone! Everyone in that village would have known that Mary was, well, "in the family way". They probably expected Joseph to drop Mary the second he found out. Heck, they would have approved! Just deserts for that little tramp!

In the gospels, Joseph only appears at the beginning of two: Matthew and Luke. After that he vanishes. Likely he was quite a bit older than Mary, and since life expectancy in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine was short – 40 would have been old – then it's not hard to figure out that by the time Jesus' public ministry started Joseph was likely already dead.

His role, even so, is quite remarkable! Far from dropping Mary he embraced her and this child who was not his. And, when the child was born, he continued to obey that dream and named the child "Jesus", which in Hebrew means "YHWH Saves". Think about it: a peasant nobody, out in the boonies of the Galilee, living what even many Galileans would have considered a backwater collection of huts, calling his son the Savior of the world! Now that's either incredible trust, or amazing arrogance! I'm going with the former.

And so, in Dreamer Joseph, the dream lived on. That's a capital "T" and a capital "D": The Dream; the Great Dream of Humanity...the dream of the Prophets, and of Jesus, and of all the great people of faith, Christian or not: of Francis of Assisi, and Julian of Norwich, of Abraham and Martin and Nelson, and Mohammed and the Buddha, and all the great, humble people of

faith across the ages

And what is that dream? That one day, one day we will all “rise up and live out the true meaning of” being creatures created by God for peace, and joy, and love.

That dream reflects our deep yearning on every level – personal, communal, national – for wholeness, for restoration, for reconciliation, for peace. We hope. We hope and we believe that all that is broken will be restored, all that’s grown old will be made new, that the peaceable kingdom will overwhelm the world of violence, that all that’s scattered will be brought back into unity with itself.

We long for that day to come, for that dream of God to be fulfilled.

I wonder, do *we* believe the dream that Joseph dreamed? Do we obey the angel? Not to be afraid? Do we believe the angel? There’s something to think about for the few days between now and The Big Day!

I said earlier that Matthew and Luke had quite different presentations, but they’re telling the same story. Matthew, with Luke, still covers the essential parts: unplanned pregnancy, fear of discovery, encounter with an angel, the promise of a future mission of love, and the humble acceptance of each parent in response to God’s call.

It’s the character of that hope and that promise that really sets this story apart! In the face of all that life threw at this couple they persevered. They endured. They rejoiced. They honored God.

As faithful Jews they would have been familiar with Isaiah’s proclamation to King Ahaz of a coming savior. That promise, that hope, must have echoed down the generations to them, just as it continued to echo down the generations to us so that in our times of trial the cry of the psalmist: “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” that cry continues to ring in our hearts.

Just a few, short days, and we can move from anticipation more fully into the celebration of that promise, that hope.

But not yet! Not quite yet! It’s as if we’re standing just outside the threshold, looking in though the open top of a Dutch door that’s still closed at the bottom, longing to be inside in front of the warm hearth we can see on the other side of the brightly lit room. We know we’ll hear stories of good cheer and share in fellowship with those who are important to us once we get inside; but we know, too, that we have to wait just a little longer, have to live with the anticipation, have to learn how to stay on the doorstep until the Great Invitation is issued and the door swings back and welcoming arms and happy smiles beckon!

May it not be too hard for you to wait – because this moment that lies ahead of us, it’s worth waiting for!!           Amen.