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God's Dream

Matthew 1:20

King Ahaz was a desperate man. The politics of the Middle East had placed him in a terrible position. The superpower of the day was Assyria. A coalition was forming among small states in the region to oppose Assyria. Ahaz decided it was too risky to become part of this alliance. He wasn't prepared to oppose a superpower. But now this coalition of neighboring countries has dispatched an army to attack Jerusalem and replace Ahaz with a king they can control. The prophet Isaiah tells us that the sound of this invading army sweeping through the land causes the King and his people to shake with fear as trees in the forest shake before the wind. Ahaz can see everything he has worked for about to be destroyed.

The last thing Ahaz wants at this moment is advice from a meddling prophet. Isaiah approaches the King to reinterpret this political disaster and remind him that the people of God do not survive by political cunning or military power. Instead of playing power politics and choosing between equally dangerous alliances he should place his faith in God. Isaiah tells Ahaz that he should not resist this invasion because its impact will be short lived. The tables will turn and the invaders will leave. God will be faithful in meeting the needs of God's people. If Ahaz doubts God's promise the prophet will be more than happy to offer a sign. Ahaz tells the prophet to go away. He doesn't need signs. He needs a better army or a brilliant diplomat. He needs resources that will enable him to defend his interests.

But Isaiah is not so easily brushed off. He gives Ahaz a sign whether he wants it or not. It is a sign that is not like anything that Ahaz could have imagined. There is nothing "showy" about it. It doesn't appear to come from heaven. It is something that is quiet, gentle, and ordinary. A young woman will give birth to a son. In this son the love of God will be revealed.

This is a sign that points to God's dream that humanity will be made whole. Isaiah proclaims that God can be trusted to bring this dream to fruition. But Ahaz wants nothing to do with Isaiah's signs or God's dream. He cannot give up on his own dream of political success long enough to pay attention to a prophet.

In the first chapter of Matthew we read about another man whose life collides with God's dream. Joseph is facing decisions he does not want to make. The woman to whom he is betrothed is pregnant. He knows that he is not the father. Joseph is confronted with a mess and he must decide how to respond to it.

Betrothal in ancient Palestine meant much more than engagement does in our setting. It was a formal contract which could only be broken by divorce. Joseph has a playbook for dealing with a situation like this. As a man who lives by the law of Moses he is entitled to publicly divorce Mary and expose her obvious infidelity. Joseph knows full well what that will mean for Mary. She will be publicly condemned. She may be stoned to death as an adulteress or she and her baby may be shunned by the community, disowned by her family, and forced to survive on whatever she can beg or steal.

Joseph decides to set aside the playbook in favor of a quiet divorce. A “no fault” divorce will enable them both to put the pieces of their lives back together again.

Joseph understands that his dreams have been shattered. The unthinkable has happened and disillusionment is setting in. It is at this moment that Joseph is visited by an angel in a dream. The angel comes to reinterpret the events that have brought him to his knees.

The angel who comes to Joseph is providing the same kind of support that Clarence gives George Bailey in the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Clarence is an angel who takes on the assignment of convincing George that his life has not been wasted. George Bailey needs someone to give him a different interpretation of his desperate situation. His dreams of financial success have been shattered. But that is not the central truth about his life. The truth is that his life has had a positive impact on others that goes far beyond what he can see or appreciate. In the ways that count the most he is wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. But Clarence does not have an easy task. George Bailey needs a great deal of help to be able to give up one dream and embrace another.

The angel who speaks to Joseph offers a different perspective on the dilemma that confronts him. Mary has not been unfaithful and neither has God. By the power of God she will give birth to a son who will bring God's saving presence to humanity. The angel announces to Joseph God's dream for a redeemed humanity. Joseph must decide whether to embrace it.

This cannot have been an easy decision for Joseph. It is never easy to give up on our personal dreams so that we can embrace God's dream. We are all much more inclined to be like Ahaz, clinging to our own plans to the bitter end and refusing to pay attention to the signs of God's presence. But Joseph finds a way to do what the angel commands. He takes Mary as his wife and when the baby comes Joseph names him Jesus. It is the name of one who would save his people from their sins. Joseph believes in God's dream and leaves the playbook behind.

Martin Copenhaver has described Joseph's decision in these words:

No wonder Matthew seems to have a particular fondness for Joseph. Here is a righteous man who surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with creating and decides to believe that God is present in it. With every reason to disown it all, to walk away from it in search of a neater, more controlled life...Joseph does not do that. He claims the scandal, he owns the mess—he legitimizes it—and the mess becomes the place where the Messiah is born (*Journal For Preachers*, page 35).

Joseph teaches us how to move beyond our broken dreams. He shows us how to look for God's presence in the messes of our lives. It is there that we, too, can learn to dream God's dream.