

CONTRARY DREAMIN' ON SUCH A WINTER'S DAY

Commentary for Advent IV - 2007 *

*This reflection is an updated version of a piece first written in Advent, 2004.

Gospel Reading

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream ...

Everyone dreams. But have you ever had one of those dreams that was so vivid and telling that it startled you into reconsidering where you'd come from, who you were, or – contrary to all your wakeful plans — where you were headed? The kind of dream that runs contrary to all your daydreaming? The kind of extraordinary dream even an ordinary Joe – contrary to all his daydreaming -- might have?

Most likely, we all have.

Describing last night's dreams to another person is usually about as exciting as telling them about your last operation, or your last road trip to Fresno ... But briefly, here's a dream I had one night recently that startled me awake with a self-conscious laugh at three o'clock in the morning.

I was seated in a restaurant in downtown Walnut Creek in the middle of the afternoon, when the tables were nearly empty and the customer traffic was light. I looked up and saw someone seated alone in the opposite corner, staring at

me. Though it was someone whom I had not seen, nor with whom I had had little contact for over twenty-five years, I recognized her immediately as someone who had at one time been a very significant part of my life. In fact, we'd once been married for eight years.

In my dream, the apparition stood up and walked over to my table and sat down across from me. She looked older; but, then again, I figured I probably looked older to her too! She began to speak and went on for a short while, until I interrupted her. Slowly, deliberately, I asked, "What do you need to hear me say to you?" I knew the answer, before she could really begin to reply. So as she began to speak again, I looked at her and simply said, "I'm sorry."

Then I awoke. It was 3:00 A.M. It was a cold winter's night, but the bedcovers were warm and reassuring, and I could return to sleep.

After a quarter of a century, a collage of images, experience and memory stirred from who knows where in my subconscious to manifest itself in what was for me a powerful dream.

In modern dream science research, the debate has progressed to the point of exploring and interpreting ordinary phenomena as a combination of physiological changes which occur in different portions of the brain in sleep mode, to all the psychological twists and turns we weave over a lifetime; with enough cumulative raw material to make a psychotherapist absolutely drool over the prospect of three sessions a week for the rest of one's natural days. What inner conflict was seeking resolution in the dream sequence I conjured up for myself last week? Or, what did I eat for supper?

Ancients, on the other hand, believed dreams were visions and visitations of divine spirits or other celestial beings, quite apart from one's own body, mind and spirit. The Bible, too, is filled with such experiences, described as dreams. There's Jacob's ladder and wrestling match.

There's Joseph's dreams with their bleak forecasts of the plagues of Egypt upon Pharaoh and his people. There's Mary's visitation by the archangel, Gabriel, with the same startling news Joseph receives in his own dream in this evening's gospel passage. And there is the warning dream the magi have, not to return and share their joyous news with the treacherous Herod.

Greek philosophers, like Aristotle and Hippocrates, suggested dreams were a product of our own invention; their usefulness lay in our ability to inform us (and therefore have a hand in shaping) our own destiny; and even as a means of diagnosing illness.

In the Bible, however, it is through Mary's and Joseph's dreams that it is announced God will once again – but this time uniquely through the incarnation of God's own self – *actively insert* God's life-giving Spirit into the human story; and do so quite literally and graphically, in such a way that not only the chosen elect, but all of humanity, will be redeemed: These dreams have within them the terrifying news the Holy Spirit will impregnate a virgin. And these two humble human beings have to go along with it.

Just imagine. The entire success of the assertion of a *pregnant* virgin and the Divine's incarnate plan, hinges on the very human relationship between Mary and a shadowy figure known as Joseph, son of David. As Matthew sets the stage: "When Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child ... from the Holy Spirit."

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That's a hard sell, in anybody's book; but quite frankly probably more so today than when dreams and visions were less domesticated. Yet even in Matthew's day people may have wondered how Joseph would perpetuate the lineage of David if he was not the physical father. In Jewish law, there was a provision for legal adoption of an "illegitimate" child; Joseph could acknowledge Jesus by naming him "son of David," and accepting legal fatherhood. But would he? Would I? Would you? Doesn't this Divine Plan for the redemption of humankind just leave a rather bad taste in one's mouth?

So, what kind of a guy was this Joseph character? Matthew tells us he's a decent fellow, righteous, some would say even magnanimous; in the fact that he's apparently willing to quietly "dismiss her." In fact, he had "resolved" to do this, Matthew says.

And I imagine when Joseph had, in fact, consciously resolved this raging conflict within himself, he must have gone to bed that night, alone -- again; but at least with his mind settled. He'd finally be able to get a good night's sleep, he must have thought to himself, after days of tossing and turning over the pain of his angry hurt and gnawing suspicions. A good night's sleep would be welcome relief.

But then, this startling night dream.

Perhaps it was a dream that had begun with a blinding flash the held within it every promise of releasing him to run wild and escape the drudgery of his mundane existence, a dead-end job and a bleak future for a Galilean peasant living under strict religious codes of behavior and a brutal and repressive occupation by the only superpower in the world. It was a dream that might have begun with sweet promise -- like those *daydreams* he'd often had of Mary.

Contrary to everything else that beset his life, at least there'd been Mary. Ah, Mary! She'd been the sum of his hopes and dreams for sons, old age, companionship through the long winter's night, and maybe even pomegranates in the spring ... Despite all else, she was one promised possession he'd prized above all else; and, though *only* a woman, he might even honor and cherish. This is the way I imagine it could have easily happened:

Only the day before, Joseph had been daydreaming. It was a typical day for a poor carpenter, working quickly while there was daylight, when the days were short and winter was blackening the sky well before supper. Hammer, and chisel, and hard olive wood; peg and mortise, table and stool. His nostrils would fill with the familiar smell of dust and wood chips, as he'd struggle to recall the scent of her hair.

He wondered if his rough and callused hands were already too worn to feel how soft the back of her neck would be, when they would one day soon curl up and lie together. It was only one man's dream, a peasant's dream; not much of a dream, by some standards: a length of days, an insignificant life in the scheme of things, a winter sun for warmth, a peasant's wife, and – if God would grant him such favor – sons. His own sons.

What kind of father would he be, he would have asked himself, as we all do? Too strict or gruff, lenient or neglectful, indulgent or loving, or — most likely, a little bit of everything? It would be blessing enough.

And then, contrary to an ordinary man's ordinary dreams, this *other* intrusive dream and startling vision would rouse in him another, different calling. And he would wake with this unwelcome call to take Mary as his wife, cast out his fears, and play the fool. If he could abandon all his lost daydreams, would he be a fool for God.

The tradition would quickly go on to push Joseph's perfunctory role in the nativity story further back into the shadows, where his own dreams would fade. What of his own hopes and hurts? The gospels would tell of Mary weeping for her son at the foot of the cross on Calvary. Would anyone know or care to wonder about Joseph, his absence, or his aching heart?

In an apocryphal infancy gospel from Syria dated in the second century there appears a fanciful legend that portrays Joseph as a widower who previously had two sons; which conveniently explains Jesus' brothers. It also provides a reasonable explanation why Joseph initially declines to take Mary as his wife because – as his script is written – “I already have two sons and am old.”

As if the divine scheme isn't enough of an insult, now the poor guy is even portrayed as over the hill and beyond the point of being any competition for the Holy Spirit. So in this version, he simply takes her into his house, caring for her and protecting her virginity.

In this legend, Joseph is not just portrayed as a simple carpenter. He's a general contractor who goes off on a large construction project, and returns home one day to discover she's pregnant. But even after a dream convinces *Joseph* that she is a pregnant *virgin*, they can't keep it a secret for long, for obvious reasons. The temple elders learn of it, reproach Mary and Joseph, and demand what is essentially a church trial.

Once again, the ecclesiastical authorities – those keepers of the covenant, the spiritual shepherds of the flock – are the ones who've lost sight of the whole point of God's loving, compassionate, redemptive and reconciling plan. Blind to the hand of the One for whom they'd presumably waited centuries, they now cannot conceive of such a thing as Mary's conception being that of this contrary kind of a God acting in their very midst. Instead they've simply become the provincial morality police.

So, at the trial -- in this legendary tale -- Mary and Joseph are compelled to drink something called “a water of conviction” that will

presumably reveal their sins. They drink it. Nothing happens, and they're off the hook. But the apocryphal tales continue, human nature being what it is. Somehow, people just have trouble believing something too good to be true can actually happen; perhaps because such divine gifts comes to them in ways that only seem to fall so short of our expectations and presumptions; presumptions about what's real, what's important, what such things as wealth, or power, or privilege or position are supposed to do for you, etc. A pregnant, unwed teen is bad enough. Worse is some blue-collar schmuck of a surrogate step-father willing to go along with it, play the fool and be forgotten. Apparently he does not reflect the kind of virtues the world highly values.

Many years later, in the 9th century, an anonymous Latin author compiled a collection of ancient traditions in a document known as the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*. In it there is a story of Mary and Joseph in an orchard. The pregnant woman is having cravings for the ripest fruit from the highest branch of the tallest tree. In the Late Middle Ages it becomes the beautiful English hymn, *The Cherry Tree Carol*.

When Joseph was an old man,
an old man was he,
He married Virgin Mary,
the Queen of Galilee. *Repeat.*

Joseph and Mary
walked through an orchard green.
There were berries and cherries,
as rich as might be seen. *Repeat.*

Mary said to Joseph,
so meek and so mild,
“Joseph gather me some cherries,
for I am with child. *Repeat.*

Then Joseph flew in anger,
in anger flew he.
“Let the father of the baby
gather cherries for thee.” *Repeat.*

Then up spoke baby Jesus,
from within Mary's womb,
“Bend down the tallest tree,
that my mother might have some.” *Repeat.*

Then bent down the tallest branch,
till it touched Mary's hand.
Cried she, “O look, thou Joseph,
I have cherries by command.” *Repeat.*

When Joseph was an old man,
an old man was he,
He married Virgin Mary,
the Queen of Galilee. *Repeat.*

On a winter's day, a day typically filled with ordinary hopes and dreams by an ordinary "son of David," and child of God, something utterly contrary to the sum of all our everyday blessings and curses breaks in to confound us, transform us, redeem us.

Contrary to all our conjuring, contrary to all the "hopes and fears of all our years," the forgotten fool of God welcomes our Emmanuel.

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