

“Joseph’s Dream”
Based on Matthew 1: 18-25
by Rev. Meghan Davis
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I’m not much of a dreamer. I never have been. Well, I guess maybe every now and then when I was a boy, I would have dreams and tell my mother about them. Mostly the ones where you’re flying, or where something bad is trying to catch you and you can’t run, like your feet are stuck in mud. I used to think that dreams were just for the prophets. You know, in the scriptures the way it’ll say, “the prophet saw the Word of God.” I thought dreams were just for the prophets and holy men, not ordinary guys, carpenters like myself. So when I had a dream, I took notice. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I should start at the beginning.

I’ve known Mary since she was a baby. Her family lived near mine in Bethlehem and our families frequently spoke of the possibility of a marriage between us. I was always quite fond of Mary and hoped that we would one day marry, when she was old enough. I can’t tell you how happy I was when the day finally came that we were able to settle the details of our betrothal. Everything I’d ever wanted was starting to happen and Mary seemed pleased, too.

But then, after we were betrothed, but before the marriage was finalized and she came to live with me, she told me that she was going to have a baby. I was shocked. How could she possibly be pregnant? I am a righteous man and I know Mary well. She is a righteous girl. How could this be? But even worse than the fact that she was with child, was her refusal to apologize or accept any blame. I admit, I took it pretty hard when she told me. I told her I was outraged at her infidelity and the scandal that she would bring upon me and my family and her family, and I demanded to know who the father was. She would only say, “I have not been unfaithful to you. This is God’s plan.” And she was so strong and sure of herself. I almost didn’t even recognize her as the Mary I’d known all those years. And I was almost convinced. I just couldn’t imagine that she would be able to stand there and look me in the eye, without shedding a tear, and say, “I have not been unfaithful” if it weren’t true.

But how could I possibly go ahead with the wedding? I would be the laughing stock of Bethlehem. She said she hadn’t told anyone, but I knew it would only be a matter of time before the whole town was talking about it. Betrothal is equivalent to marriage, so infidelity is adultery. Adultery is a serious crime. A woman can be stoned for it. But I knew I didn’t want that. Without knowing why, I still cared for her and I didn’t want her to suffer any more than necessary. But at the same time, I just couldn’t marry her. Of course, our culture is patriarchal. The birth of the first born son is really important, crucial to the

family line and transfer of property. If I chose to go ahead with the wedding, I would be choosing to give up my right to father my own first born son.

For days, I couldn't sleep or eat or think of anything other than the situation. For days, all that went through my mind was, what should I do about Mary? What does social custom and the law demand? What does my heart tell me? What should I do about Mary? Finally, I decided that I just couldn't go through with the wedding. I would try to put her away quietly and try to keep her from public disgrace, though in a town this size, I didn't know exactly how that would be possible. But I just didn't see any other option.

Once I had made up my mind, at last I was able to fall asleep. But then, I had the dream. A messenger of God, and angel, came to me 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."

Well, things just kept getting weirder and weirder. I thought, "Why couldn't I have just married into another family? I should have married my neighbor's daughter, Ruth..." But I didn't. And now my betrothed is pregnant and I'm having a dream telling me to marry her anyway because her baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit and that I have to name him Jesus—I don't even really like that name—and the topper is that he's going to be some kind of Messiah? Saving his people from their sins? If I thought I had situation on my hands before, I had no idea how much more complicated it could get...

So I had a choice to make. Follow social custom and dismiss Mary, or trust this dream, trust the angel, trust that God would provide a marvelous answer through Mary, my young bride. Like I said before, it's not every day I have a dream. In fact, I never dream. So when I had this dream—that was so clearly a message from God telling me what to do—what choice did I have? Like Jonah, I wanted to run the other way, go to another town where no one would know me and just start a new life. But that tactic didn't work for Jonah and I figured it wouldn't work for me, either. So I decided to go ahead and marry the girl. I figured the sooner we got married, the better. It would attract less attention.

Once I decided to go ahead and marry her, I suddenly had this wave of relief come over me. I knew that it was the right thing to do. I was even excited about it. Now I knew that my first child was on the way and that it would be boy. And I don't know why, but for some reason, this line from the Prophet Isaiah came to mind, "Look, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." This passage from Isaiah isn't about a virgin; in the original Hebrew *'almah* refers to a young woman with no distinction of whether or

not she is married or whether or not she has... had marital relations. And this text is not about a miraculous birth, it's not about a child conceived by the Holy Spirit. But I think the reason it came to mind is because Emmanuel means "God with us." And it is not so much a proper name as a title. I wasn't told to name my son Messiah or Emmanuel, I was told to name him Jesus. And Jesus, Yeshua in Hebrew, Joshua in Greek, means "Yahweh saves." That's what the angel said, that my son would save his people. So I named him Jesus.

You might be wondering why I refer to Jesus as my son, so I guess I should explain, because here's where we come to what some people consider a genealogical problem. The Messiah is supposed to come from the House of David. I am from the house of David, but if I am not Jesus' father, then how can he be the Messiah, Son of David? In our culture, when I named Jesus, I claimed him, said he was mine. In essence, I adopted him. There's no distinction of whether or not he is my biological son. He became my son legally and inherited my genealogy. He became a Son of David.

But the angel told me that the child would be "from the Holy Spirit." What would that mean? What would that mean for Mary and me? What would it mean for him? What would that mean for the world? I've been pondering this for years. And the best I can come up with is, "To say that Mary's child is 'from the Holy Spirit' is to say that this is a radically new beginning and, furthermore, that it is God's doing, not ours."¹ That's not the easiest thing to accept. The birth of my son marks a new beginning for us all, for God's relationship with us and for God's activity in the world and in history. And we humans are not in charge. We didn't bring about this new beginning, this is God's doing.

God has promised throughout time to be with us. All of God's promises have that aspect in common: they are God's promise to be with us. Throughout time, God has kept that promise and now, in the most tangible possible way, God has fulfilled that promise by coming to earth in the form of my son. And all I can do is stand in as this child's earthly father, step up and welcome Jesus into my family, as my own. All I can do is to trust God.

¹ Charles M. Wood, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 96.