Sunday, December 1, 1991
JOSEPH'S ADVENT DREAM
Matthew 1:18-23

During the Advent and Christmas season, all of us have a number of dreams. Whether we are children or adults, most of us dream about what gifts we might receive or give. Some of us dream about Christmases of the past. Many years ago, Bing Crosby made a song about Christmas and dreams famous: "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" by Irving Berlin. We all have our Christmas dreams and our Christmas memories.

Before the first Christmas occurred, Joseph, who was engaged to Mary — the young woman chosen by God to be the mother of our Savior — had a dream. I call it "Joseph's Advent Dream." The Gospel of Matthew tells the story. When Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Not wanting to embarrass her, he planned to secretly break the engagement. Then he had his Advent dream. In the dream, God said to Joseph, "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."

Although in the dream, God didn't give him many details, and therefore Joseph had no idea how God would bring all this about, he nevertheless trusted God enough to go ahead and become Mary's husband as planned, even though she was pregnant.

I believe Joseph was a man of deep religious faith. Those of us who have little or no faith and who do not trust in God rarely have dreams or visions that help guide us. And sometimes, those of us who have dreams want all the answers before we follow them.

But dreams rarely spell out all the details. They never tell us about the successes and failures along the way. Rather, they give us direction and purpose. For example, when God told Joseph in his Advent dream that Jesus would save his people from their sins, neither Joseph nor anyone else had any idea that one day, while yet a young man, Jesus would be crucified. And God didn't tell Joseph that the baby would be born in a stable and that shepherds would be the first to get the news.

While Jesus was still a baby, Joseph had another dream. This time, God told Joseph to take the baby and Mary to Egypt to save their lives. No details except, "Get out of town." And later, in yet another dream, Joseph was told it was safe to return to his own country and hometown of Nazareth. Joseph followed his dreams, and because of his trust in God, he was an important part of the highest adventure in human history, a major character in the greatest story ever told.

Now let me tell you about my Advent dream. Growing up as a child in the Midwest, I often saw signs along the highways, usually in bold letters, announcing that Jesus was coming again and soon! These signs always carried a warning to shape up so you would be ready and found to be pure and righteous when Jesus returned. Similar warnings could be heard on the radio by certain preachers—"Christ is coming! Are you ready?" I was never sure if I was ready or not.

Later on, as a young man, I had a dream of becoming a minister. There were no details in this dream. I had no idea where I might be called to be a pastor of a church. I never dreamed that one day I would be in Lincoln, Nebraska, and would live here longer than anywhere else. If I

had waited for God to give me all the details of how my dream might be fulfilled, it would never have taken place. Only when we begin acting on our dreams do they begin to come true.

Since then, I've had many dreams that have guided me in my life. But today, I want to tell you about my Advent dream for 1991 and beyond. And just as Joseph's dream had to do with the birth of Christ into the world, my Advent dream is about the coming of Christ into the world, his first coming, and his second coming.

In the first coming of Christ into the world, almost all of the world missed it — even those who were expecting a Messiah and those who had predicted it. They missed it because they were looking in the wrong place and because they were expecting something quite different than a baby in a stable. And even when Jesus was a grown man — those who expected the coming of a Savior and who longed for it to happen, rejected Jesus as that person. Their dream was not about a man who talked about and lived the love of God, or about someone who said we are to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us. Their dream of God with us did not include someone who would say, "Blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers." Their dream did not include a man on a cross and an empty tomb.

If so many missed the first coming, then many may also be surprised and miss the second coming. Or maybe the first coming and the second coming are one and the same. Someone once asked me, "When will Christ come again?" And I replied, "I didn't know he had left."

Again and again in human history, when events get unusually complex or threatening, the tendency has been for some Christians to turn to an expectation of Christ's return and in a form that will solve all our problems without any effort on our part. People feel that things are in such a mess that only the complete intervention of God is capable of undoing what has been done. The role of passive dependency is always easier and more tempting than a stance of responsible involvement. Who has not, as a little child, wanted to gather together all the broken things and then brought them to mommy or daddy to fix? The impulse to let someone else come in and solve all our difficulties is very strong.

In my Advent dream, I see Christ coming to us again and again. The second coming is always happening and has been ever since the resurrection. Jesus is present and working in the world.

People miss Jesus today all the time because their dream of where he is present and at work in the world and in their lives is not big enough, not inclusive enough. The Savior as a baby in a stable? You and I might have missed that because our vision of where God can be found is too limited. We may also be missing where God is at work in our lives now because our vision of God is too small. Did not Jesus himself tell us, "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." Christ is present whenever we reach out in love to someone in need. Christ is present wherever two or three or more are gathered together in his name. Christ is here whenever we join him in his work to bring peace among all of us.

Are your personal dreams big enough, inclusive enough so that when they begin to come true, you are aware of it? Are your dreams about this church and what it can be big enough and inclusive enough?

Joseph’s Advent dream tells us some very important things about the way in which God works in our dreams, in our lives, and in the world.

We learn from the story of Joseph and his dreams that God often works through ordinary, unlikely, yet faithful people like you and me. God often chooses persons that we ourselves might not choose were we in charge. Amen.