Sunday, December 20, 1998
CHRISTMAS DREAMS
Matthew 1:18-25

Dreams and Christmas go together. Whether we are children or adults, most of us have dreams about Christmas. There are dreams about Christmases of the past and dreams about Christmases of the present and future. Many years ago, Irving Berlin wrote a song about a Christmas dream, which Bing Crosby first made famous—"I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." There's another Christmas song that talks about a Christmas dream—"I'll Be Home for Christmas (If Only in My Dreams)." For some of us, dreams are better than reality. I'd rather dream of a white Christmas than have one.

One of the Christmas stories in the Bible, the one in Matthew's gospel, begins with a dream and ends with a dream. Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, the young woman chosen by God to be the mother of our Savior, had a dream that caused him to change his plans.

Here's how the gospel of Matthew tells the story. Mary, the mother of Jesus, had been engaged to Joseph for several months. Before they were married, he discovered she was pregnant. The Bible story does not tell us how he first learned of the pregnancy.

According to the religious laws of that time, Joseph had two options for breaking off the engagement because of Mary's pregnancy. The first, and most radical, option allowed Joseph to have Mary stoned to death. An engagement of marriage in the eyes of Jewish law meant that the man and woman were technically husband and wife. Mary's pregnancy by someone else meant she had committed adultery, and that was punishable by death. Remember how Jesus rescued a woman from being stoned to death because of committing adultery.

A second option would have allowed Joseph to have Mary publicly humiliated and disgraced. She would be ostracized from the community, branded an adulterous woman, and shunned.

But instead of choosing either of these options, Joseph decided to break off the engagement privately. Instead of seeking vengeance, he decided to do what he thought was best for Mary and himself. Then, because of a dream, he changed even this plan.

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."

God didn't give him any more details. Joseph had no idea how God would bring this all about. Nevertheless, he had enough trust in God to go ahead and marry Mary as planned.

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

But dreams rarely give us all the details. They never tell us about the successes and failures along the way. Their function is to give us vision, direction, and purpose.

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. There were no details except to leave the

country. Later, in 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.

There's one other dream in Matthew's version of the Christmas story. This dream gave instructions to the Wise Men. The discovery of the special star in the sky had led them to Jerusalem. There they inquired, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard of it, he asked the Wise Men to report back to him once they found the child. However, in Matthew's story, we are told that after finding the child, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they returned home by another route.

Christmas dreams! What do these Christmas dreams tell us about God and the way God works in the world, in your life and mine?

First, these Christmas dreams tell us that God frequently works in ways that surprise us. This is one of the important lessons that Joseph discovered through his dreams and by following them. Matthew's story leading up to Christmas also illustrates this. Before he tells us the story of Joseph's dreams and Jesus' birth, Matthew gives a list of Jesus' ancestors. As we might expect, Jesus had an unusual family tree. Included in Matthew's list are four women, and all of them have been involved in things that would embarrass most of us.

One great-great-grandmother, Tamar, masqueraded as a prostitute to have a child (Genesis 38:11-27). Another, Rahab, didn't pretend — she was a full-time prostitute (Joshua 2). Ruth, according to the story, spent the night with Boaz in his bed (Ruth 3:1). Then there's Bathsheba, who is not specifically mentioned by name but only as Uriah's wife; she committed adultery with King David. Her first child died, but her second child was Solomon, who followed David as King of Israel.

Why does Matthew include these four in the list of Jesus' ancestors? I believe he does it to underscore the fact, as Joseph learned in his Christmas dreams, that God often works in ways we never expect and chooses people that surprise us.

Second, the Christmas dreams of Joseph tell us that the spirit of Christmas involves learning how to receive gifts as well as how to give them. As I said in last week's sermon, God's gifts, when we receive them graciously, turn out to be better than expected.

Instead of breaking off his engagement with Mary, Joseph's first Christmas dream told him to receive the gift of Mary as his wife, even though she was pregnant, and it wasn't the way he would have planned it.

I'm not suggesting that giving has no part in the spirit of Christmas, but I am saying that giving is only one side of the meaning of Christmas. The other side is graciously receiving. The first line of one of my favorite Advent hymns is: "O how shall I receive you, how meet you on your way, blessed hope of every people, my soul's delight and stay?"

As an adult, when Jesus was carrying out His ministry, He knew how to receive gifts graciously. Remember the story of the woman who gave Jesus a very precious gift. He was

staying at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany, and following the meal, while He was still sitting at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive ointment. She opened it and poured it on the head of Jesus, and He accepted this beautiful gift with gratitude and grace.

The others who were with Jesus in the house that day were critical of the fact that He received the gift so graciously. They were afraid to criticize Him directly, so instead, they complained about the woman who gave the gift.

Being able to receive gifts graciously is an important part of life because it helps us to receive God's grace as a gift. Sometimes we say to someone who gives us a beautiful and unexpected gift, "You shouldn't have done it. I don't deserve it." What we forget is that when such gifts are given, whether or not we deserve them is not the important part of the giving. The gift is given to us in the spirit of love, which does not take into account whether or not it is deserved.

Probably most of us have had the experience of receiving, right out of the blue, a gift from someone we don't know well. And perhaps to our consternation, the gift turns out to be something nice — something that we didn't know we wanted and certainly didn't ask for, but there it is, a good gift from someone we didn't expect.

Now, what is the first thing we do in response? We try to come up with a gift to give in return — not necessarily out of gratitude, but because we don't want to feel guilty. We don't want to be indebted. The gift seems to lay a claim upon us, especially since it has come from someone we didn't expect. This is uncomfortable; it's hard to look the person in the face until we have reciprocated.

It may well be, as Jesus said, more blessed to give than to receive, but it is more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. What do parents do when their teenage son comes home with a very expensive Christmas present from a young woman he had dated only twice? "Now, you take that expensive sweater right back and tell her that your parents won't allow you to accept it. Every gift comes with a claim, and you're not ready for her claim upon you."

Consider what we do at Christmas, the so-called season of giving. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as generous, benevolent, giving people. Christmas is a season to celebrate our generosity. The newspapers keep us posted on how many needy families have been taken care of.

We love Christmas because, as we say, it brings out the best in us. Everyone gives at Christmas, even the stingiest among us. Charles Dickens's story of Scrooge's transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than the stories in Luke and Matthew. Dickens tells us how we can give to others. This picture is more congenial to our favorite image of ourselves. He suggests that deep down, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people.

Maybe — just maybe — we are better givers than receivers, not only because we can be generous people, but because we are proud people. The Christmas stories in Matthew and Luke are not primarily about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.

What does it take on our part to receive gifts graciously, as Joseph and Jesus did?

It takes humility. There are people who are very isolated and feel superior. They live in a tower of pride and come to believe they don't need anything from anyone. They also believe that everything they have is deserved because they've earned it. They are very secure in giving to others because it reinforces their feeling of superiority. This doesn't mean they should stop their giving. What they need to learn is how to receive gifts from others graciously.

There was a physician who was one of the most respected members of the medical community in the city where he lived and practiced medicine. Other doctors, if they encountered a particularly difficult case, would send their patients to him for consultation.

One day, one of the other doctors in the hospital noticed that this highly respected physician didn't look well. He mentioned this to his colleague, who acknowledged that he had not been feeling well. His friend then suggested that he would welcome the opportunity to help him in any way. "Thank you for your interest," replied the respected physician in a rather brusque manner, "but I am the senior man on this staff, and I can look after myself."

Several months later, he died of an illness that could have been cured if treated in time. So used to giving, this man could not accept the thought of receiving. After the funeral, his friend who had offered to help kept asking, "Why didn't he let me or someone help him?" It takes a certain amount of humility to let others give to us and to receive the gift graciously.

Through his dreams and in the birth of Jesus, Joseph discovered that God is not impressed by the mighty and powerful in this world. God does not come to us in the garb of a conqueror. In an incredible act of humility, God enters our world the same way each of us does — as a baby.

The important people were not even notified. Those who first learned about the birth were not the movers and shakers of that day — only some shepherds came to the manger later that night. CNN wasn't there to cover the event. The Jerusalem Times did not have a news story or even a birth announcement.

What about your Christmas dreams and mine? People miss God at work in the world today because their dream of where God is working 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 dream of where God can be found is too limited. People can also miss God at work in the world and in their lives because they are not ready to be receivers of God's grace. It's tough to be on the receiving end of God's love or anybody else's. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. Amen.