Book 36

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 the 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 which 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 who had been chosen by God to be the mother of our Savior had a dream which 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 a number of 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 in breaking off this engagment because of Mary's pregnancy. The first option and most radical one allowed Joseph to have Mary stoned to death. An engagement of

marriage in the eyes of the Jewish law meant that the man and woman were technically husband and wife. Mary's pregnancy by someone else meant that 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. Mary would be ostracized from the community, branded an adulterous woman to be shunned by the community.

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 as to how God would bring this all about. He nevertheless had enough trust in God to go ahead and become Mary's husband as they had planned.

Joseph was a man of deep religious faith. Those of us who have little or no faith and who do not have much trust in God rarely have dreams or

visions which help guide us. And sometimes those of us who have dreams want all of the details and answers before we follow our dreams.

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 leave the country. And later in another dream, Joseph was told it was safe to return to his own country and home town 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. Here 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 road.

Christmas dreams! What do these Christmas dreams tell us about God and the way God works in the world and 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 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 are embarrassing to most of us.

One great-great-grandmother, Tamar, masqueraded as a prostitute in order 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 Bethsheba, who's not specifically mentioned by name, but only as Uriah's wife, 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 that 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 and 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 one day 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 it 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 really don't know that well. And perhaps to our consternation, the gift turns out to be 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--n-ot 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 recipro-cated.

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

teen-aged 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 on 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 did Joseph and Jesus?

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 have earned it. They are very secure in giving to others because it re-inforces 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 in which 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 very respected physician was not looking as well as he should. He mentioned this to his colleague and he acknowledged that he had not been feeling well. His friend then suggested that he would welcome the opportunity to be of whatever help he could. "Thank you for your interest," replied the respected physician in a rather brusque manner, "but I am senior man on this staff and I can look after myself."

Several months later, he died of an illness which if it had been treated in time, could have been cured. So used to giving, this man could not accept the thought of receiving. After the funeral, his friend who had offered to be of 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 in the same way as each one of us, 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 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.