Sunday, December 19, 2004
JOSEPH'S DREAMS
Matthew 1:18-25

There are two Christmas stories in the Bible, one in Luke's gospel and another in Matthew's gospel. In Luke's story, Mary is the main character along with the baby Jesus. In Matthew's version, Joseph is the main character. Luke's story begins: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be enrolled." The story continues with the journey to Bethlehem and the baby being born in a stable and placed in a manger because there was no room in the inn.

Matthew's story begins: "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." In his story, there is no angel visitor to Mary, no visit to Elizabeth. The manger is not mentioned, and he implies Jesus was born in a house. There's no mention of the shepherds. But there is the story of the wise men and Herod. In Matthew's version, the angel visitors appear to Joseph in dreams, not to Mary.

Joseph is frequently the forgotten one during this season. In traditional Christmas pageants, he stands at the back. There are very few Christmas carols that focus on Joseph. I'm sure there are some, but I can't think of any.

Joseph's first dream reveals his inner struggle in deciding to do what's right. Marriage in those days was often a two-stage process. First, there was a formal betrothal, a ceremony in which a man and a woman were promised to each other. This usually involved an agreement between the father of the bride and the husband-to-be. The women were not consulted. It was a transfer of property. Sometimes money was involved. A bride-price was paid to the father. Once this had taken place, the two people were considered married in a legal sense, even though they did not yet live together.

The actual marriage ceremony, which sometimes took place even years later — because a husband might purchase a prospective wife from her father when she was still quite young — involved the bride and groom coming from their respective homes in a procession, going through another ceremony and a big party, and then returning together to the husband's home. Matthew says that Joseph and Mary had been legally married but had not yet had the second ceremony. They are betrothed but not yet living together.

It is during this in-between time that Mary is found to be with child by the Holy Spirit, according to Matthew's Christmas story. Joseph knows that he is not the father of the child.

You can understand his dilemma. Matthew describes him as a "righteous man," which means he lived his life according to the religious law. So he knew the law required that he should publicly accuse Mary and divorce her for being pregnant with another man's child. This would expose Mary to charges of adultery, which was a serious crime. On the other hand, Joseph is a compassionate person who, as Matthew describes it, "is unwilling to expose her to public disgrace."

In the midst of this dilemma, Joseph has a life-changing dream. In the dream, an angel told him, "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." Another translation of the angel's message is: "Do not be afraid that you are displeasing God by marrying Mary. Bend the rules a little and serve God by giving this child a father." The dream didn't give him any more details. Joseph had no idea how this would all take place.

Joseph chose to trust the dream. It turned out to be the right decision but not an easy one. Think of it this way: You are driving your car and come to an intersection. The stoplight is red, but there's a uniformed police officer standing beneath it and motioning you through. What do you do? Obey the red light or the waving officer? The right decision is to obey the police officer. The religious law says one thing. The dream says another. Follow that dream.

Joseph was a man of deep religious faith. People who have little or no faith and who do not have much trust in God rarely have dreams or visions that help guide them. Sometimes people have dreams but want to know all the details and how it will work out before following the dream. Authentic dreams rarely give you all the details in advance. They never tell you about the successes and failures along the way. Their function is to give you vision, assurance, direction, and purpose.

When Jesus was still a baby, Joseph had another very important dream. This time the angel messenger told him to take the baby and Mary to Egypt to save their lives. Again, there were few details except: leave the country. And later, in another dream, Joseph was told it was safe to return to his own country and hometown of Nazareth.

Then Joseph disappears from Matthew's gospel but not from history. Joseph followed his dreams, and because of his trust in God, he is 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 that does not involve Joseph. This dream gave instructions to the wise men. They followed the star and stopped in Jerusalem for more directions. King Herod asked the wise men to report back to him once they found the child. However, in Matthew's story, you are told that after finding the child, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went home by another road.

Dreams and Christmas go together. Whether you are a child or an adult, most of you have your Christmas dreams. Many years ago, Irving Berlin wrote a song about a Christmas dream that Bing Crosby first made famous — "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." Another Christmas song that sings about dreams is—"I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams." Sometimes dreams are better than reality. I'd rather dream of a white Christmas than have one.

Joseph's dreams — what do such dreams tell you about God and the way the power of God works in this world and in your life and mine?

First, Joseph's dreams tell you that God frequently works in ways that will surprise you. This is one of the important lessons that Joseph discovered through his dreams and by following them. Matthew's story leading up to Christmas makes the same point — God's ways will often surprise you.

Before he tells you the story of Joseph's dreams and the birth of Jesus, Matthew gives you a list of Jesus's ancestors. It is an unusual family tree. Included in Matthew's list are four women, and all of them have been involved in things that are embarrassing.

One great-great-grandmother, Tamar, masqueraded as a prostitute to get pregnant and have a child (Genesis 38:11-27). Another woman, 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's 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 women in the list of Jesus's ancestors? I believe he does it to underscore what Joseph learned from his Christmas dreams — that God often works in ways you never expect and chooses people who surprise you.

Second, Joseph's dreams remind you that the spirit of Christmas involves learning how to receive gifts as well as how to give them. Instead of breaking off his betrothal with Mary, his 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. I am saying that giving is only one side of the story. 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?"

Jesus knew how to receive gifts graciously. Remember the story of the woman who gave Jesus a very precious and surprising gift. He was staying at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany. 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. He accepted this gift with gratitude and grace.

The others who were with him in the house were critical of the gift which he received so graciously. They were reluctant to criticize him directly, so instead, they complained about the woman who gave the gift. They said it was wasteful.

Being able to receive gifts so graciously is an important part of life because it helps you to receive God's grace as a gift. Sometimes you might say to someone who has given you a beautiful and unexpected gift, "You shouldn't have done it. I don't deserve it."

What you are forgetting is that whether you deserve the gift or not is irrelevant. The gift is given in the spirit of love, which does not take into account whether or not it is deserved. That's also true of God's grace.

You've no doubt had the experience of receiving unexpectedly a gift from someone you don't really know that well. And maybe, to your consternation, the gift turns out to be very nice — something you didn't expect or need — but there it is, a good gift, a surprise.

What is one of your first responses? You try to come up with a gift to give in return -- not necessarily out of gratitude, but because you don't want to feel guilty. You don't want to be indebted. The gift seems to lay a claim on you especially when it has come from someone you didn't expect. You feel obligated to reciprocate.

It may well be, as Jesus said, more blessed to give than to receive, but for many it is more difficult to receive than to give. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. What do parents do when their teen-age daughter comes home with a very expensive Christmas gift from a young man she has dated only twice? Some of them say, “Now you take that expensive sweater right back and tell him your parents won’t allow you to accept it.” Joseph learned through his dreams that life is about giving and receiving and both are to be done graciously.

Through his dreams and in the birth of Jesus, Joseph also discovered that God is not impressed by the mighty and powerful in this world. God does not come into the world in the garb of a conqueror. In an incredible act of humility God enters your life and this world, quietly and unobtrusively.

The important people were not notified. CNN wasn’t there to cover the event. There were no newspapers with banner headlines.

Joseph’s dreams remind you that you can miss the love of God at work in the world today because your dream of where God can be found may not be big enough, not inclusive enough. The Savior as a baby in a manger -- you might have missed that because your dream of where God can be found is too small.

In his dreams Joseph also learned that responding to God is more than keeping the rules. It is living with an open spirit. It means living with the expectation that God will continually surprise you and with the trust that tomorrow can be better than today. Amen.