



“OF WONDER AND WEARY DREAMS”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 7:10-15; MATTHEW 1: 18-25
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Matthew 1:18-25

1:18 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.

1:19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

1:20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream 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.

1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

1:22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

1:23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

1:24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

1:25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

If you let yourself, your imagination can travel through time—to a place you never knew, to a time that anticipated you.

There is enough in this strange place for you to recognize the contours of everydayness.

Family ties, rules of the game, expectations, and people not living up to them. The motivating and confounding power of shame—the bewildering realities of power that is abused, the struggle to know who to trust.

Let yourself come to rest in this long ago time—where familiar fears invite your notice. Where things you’ve never known ask for your acceptance.

A girl, probably around 12 years old, is promised to a man—a man who plays by the book, a man who is solid, respected—righteous. She is promised to him in a room full of men—her father, male witnesses to the exchange, and the man, the righteous man, the man who plays by the book.

The girl is promised to the righteous man for marriage at a future time, appointed by the men gathered in that dusty room and by social convention.

She lives under the watchful eye of her father in this interim time—promised but not yet relocated to another man’s power. For weeks, months, probably a year, the young woman lives in her father’s house, marked for a transfer of power that is already underway and legally binding.

Everyone knows the rules of the game—this deal is done... unless, the young girl is “seduced” or sexually violated.ⁱ

When a girl comes up pregnant during this time of scrutiny and expectation—there is very little mercy—she knows this, he knows this—everyone knows this.

Have you ever felt the weight of this kind of impending shame, this kind of threatened loss of everything—your future, your family, your dignity, maybe even your life. Imagine the weight of everything beginning to crumble, everything falling apart.

She is pregnant. The man knows it is not his child. The worst that can happen is that she and whoever the father is will be stoned to death. The more likely scenario is that she is publically humiliated and her child will be a pariah, locked out from the favor and acceptance of the world he is born into, barred from inheritance, from public office, from winning a court decision, even from spiritual salvation.

The words used to describe this kind of child in this long ago place are the words we use for excrement.

Feel the weight of this situation. Everything is on the line.

The law is on the man’s side, the righteous man, the man who, in good faith, trusted the girl’s father to deliver his daughter in the accepted and expected way to his home. This righteous man, this man who goes by the book, knows the well-worn path of his legal entitlement.

He can demand a hearing to determine if the girl had been seduced or raped. He knows that this hearing would make their dilemma public: the girl would surely be humiliated and most probably subject to a blighted and grueling future. The

timeless horrible truth that rape is near impossible to prove, the tenacious, bewildering reality that women are often blamed for what is forced upon them, the fear that this righteous man, this man who played by the book, could also be humiliated and diminished in this scandal becoming public—feel the weight of this intractable place.

A girl, only 12 or 13, and a man who prides himself on doing things the right way—and a baby on the way that neither of them asked for and neither of them can easily welcome into their lives.

This rule following man, this man makes a decision not based on his legal entitlement, or even the doctrines of his religion—he opts for the path rarely taken—an emotionally fraught and legally contentious and socially suspect path—he seeks a quiet divorce—a hushed but official release of the young girl from the promise her father had made. Her future not secure, her reputation still under threat, this by the book man anticipated a possible way for them both to move on.

But then, in a fitful night of sleep this by the book man has a dream—an angel, a message, a change in plans. Take even a more risky path—accept the child as your own, claim the young girl as your wife—and believe that this child is not a source of shame, but a source of salvation.

Fast forward back to this place, this time.

What does it mean to take a dream to heart, a dream that asks you to get out in front of the habits of mind and heart of our time?

What does it mean to hold on to a dream that invites ridicule, marginalization? Can we accept the invitation to us from Joseph's weary dream—that this is not a by the book life that God calls us to live.

Joseph's generosity, his tenderness, his groundedness, his trust in a God who asks him to risk humiliation—challenge the templates of righteousness that swirl around us in our world today.

How many of us would have the courage to say, "This is my son."?

Weariness, wariness, fatigue, tired of the burdens of waiting for justice, for the righteous use of power—this is the heaviness of the prophet Isaiah's day in the life—this prophet Isaiah who names the weariness of humanity who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who speaks to a world who wants to know God has not forgotten us.

God's answer to our weariness is to tell us to train our eyes toward the common, the mundane, the unguarded realities of life on earth. And to ask us to say "yes" to an unlikely unfolding that God's power comes from an exposed, unprotected place—not from safety, not from predictability, not from the family of our dreams.

Incarnation scrambles propriety. Incarnation explodes the way we protect ourselves with societal acceptance and codified morality.

Incarnation goes for the jugular of oppression and cultivates a chilling possibility—that God's power will not protect us from harm; instead God's power will equip us for life in an unjust world.

God's power seeps into a wary world's dreams and regenerates our capacity to be moved, to be jolted out of our stuck judgments and expectations and habits of assuming the worst about things, about people, about what is happening.

Righteousness becomes the mechanism of healing a profoundly wounded world. And God invites us in a weary dream to be the ones who believe, the ones who move out in front of a fearful world to trust a God who coaxes justice and redemption from tragedy and shame.

Take a moment to let that sink in—all the way down to your toes.

I wonder what it means in your life right now, right here, today—that the worst thing that could happen is where God is hardest at work for a healing opportunity, a healing opportunity that goes way beyond your expectations and your fears.

You are a vessel of God's healing quest in this world.

You are in God's weary dreams of tenacious redemption—redemption that finds a way to wake up a world, a world so often blind to its own beautiful possibilities.

How will you and me be more hospitable to this incarnate mystery in our midst? After all, we are moving closer and closer to the miracle of a scandal that saves us from ourselves.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ For a substantive treatment on the socio-cultural context of marriage laws, etc see Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*.