

# “Dreams”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 6, 2019*

Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:1-23

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew’s version of the birth of Jesus is filled with dreams. The first takes place in chapter one, before Jesus’ birth, as an angel reassures Joseph that Mary’s pregnancy is not a mistake, not a sign that she has been unfaithful, but that God is at work in her and through them. We heard the second dream at the close of this morning’s first reading, where the magi are told not to go home by the same way, but to avoid Herod and take another road.

In the third dream, an angel comes again to Joseph, to also warn him about Herod; instructing Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to find refuge in Egypt. This they do; we don’t hear about how long it took them to travel those hundreds of miles or who might have helped them along the way. But, we know that the threat they had escaped was very real; for Herod ordered the massacre of all the children who might be a threat to his power. Therefore, the holy family stayed in Egypt until after Herod had died.

In the fourth dream, an angel appears again to Joseph to tell him that it is safe to return to Israel. As they begin his journey, though, another dream informs Joseph that Bethlehem is not a safe place to be, so they redirect course to Nazareth in Galilee. Through the guidance found in these dreams, there the family would live, and Jesus would be raised as a Nazorean.

Matthew does not share any additional stories about Jesus’ childhood, youth or young adulthood. It is in Luke’s Gospel that we hear the story of the twelve year-old Jesus being left behind at the Temple in Jerusalem. Here, though, in chapter three, Matthew will move directly to Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River, and the temptation in the wilderness, followed by the beginning of his public ministry. Who and what influenced Jesus in his formative years; from his parents and neighbors to his Jewish faith and tradition, is left to the imagination.

For the past four days, I had the opportunity to accompany a group of college students attending the Montreat College Conference as they explored what it means to find, create and be a part of *Compassionate Communities*. I watched and listened as they wrestled with challenging subject matters of diversity and inclusion, interfaith relations, differing understandings of justice, forgiveness and

reconciliation. This was a weighty conference filled with deep conversations about tough topics for young people navigating this transition from youth to young adult.

For example, we heard stories about unlikely partners in ministry; a Jewish feminist who advocated for orphaned and abandoned children in 1960's Oklahoma by visiting Christian churches to find volunteers to serve as foster parents; a white supremacist whose heart was changed by the acceptance of his African-American parole officer; a twenty-two year-old Muslim in Vancouver, Canada who – when the mayor's office didn't know what else to do – helped to organize people of different faiths to shelter the homeless from the cold. We learned about the relationship between Martin Luther King, Jr. – a Baptist minister from Atlanta who had traveled to India to learn more about Gandhi's non-violence; and Abraham Heschel – a Polish-American Jewish Rabbi; who marched together in Selma. We listened to music and the stories of women being held as prisoners at a local prison testify about how the acceptance and the faith they gained in jail saved them, after their home communities had largely failed them.

Our students attended sessions about how to more effectively interact with members of the Muslim faith; and how to better embrace members in their community who identify as LGBTQIA+ (if you need to know that that means, ask a young person to explain it to you!). They even learned about a Presbyterian minister named Fred Rogers who for decades taught children about *Compassionate Communities* through a program on public television – who knew?

And after listening to all of these presentations and discussions, I had the privilege to help process these experiences with our group of nine amazing young people. And what I heard from them is some of their dreams: the ways that God has been speaking to them and helping them to open their eyes to God's vision of *Compassionate Community*. I heard dreams about learning to better understand and work together with people of differing faiths. I heard dreams of being able to forgive those who have done wrong and move together into a better future. I heard dreams of working to correct some of the injustices that exist in our society – poverty, racial injustice, lack of access to education, mental health and criminal justice, just to name a few.

I am as certain as ever that there are angels speaking to our young people in their dreams. After all, an angel, by definition, is a messenger: somebody or somebodies who offer a vision of God's truth. The angels that appeared to Joseph and the magi helped them to avoid the wrathful violence that Herod intended to inflict upon them; offering a different way, and new partners in justice work. Herod's slaughter of the innocents, which hearkened back to Pharaoh's decree in

ancient Egypt, still resonates in the present: where children are suffering in refugee camps in all corners of the world, and even dying at our nation's border.

And so, our young people are dreaming of a better world; one where the church is willing and able to reach out and partner with people of all faiths to advocate for justice. At the college conference, we called this 'widening our circles' – finding those new, and sometimes unlikely, partners to help break down barriers and create better solutions for our world; and especially the innocents who are suffering in it.

As an infant child, Jesus was not able to act in his own defense; and so, through God's protection and Joseph's obedience to the angels' guidance, he was kept safe in a world full of danger. Even as potential disaster threatens Jesus, his road is marked by God's promises and human action in response. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is therefore both the living presence of God's promises of a life worth living, and a counter to those political and societal forces that would instead threaten that life.<sup>1</sup>

This much I have learned over the past week: that our young people are ready to trust in God's promise and work against injustice. They are willing to explore their own faith, and to discover partners to work with them from other faiths. They are looking to widen their circles; but have been reminded that, in order to do so, they need to practice their own faith in to discern how God is calling them to act. They are the ones who will carry on our faith traditions; but do so in a world that calls out for us to reach out: to be willing to journey into the unknown if and when necessary; and even change course along the way.

Today is the celebration of Epiphany; twelve days after Christmas and the beginning of a season where we acknowledge the light that has come into the world through the incarnation of Jesus, the Word made flesh. Next week, we will move to focus on the baptism of Jesus and – by following Matthew's account over the following weeks and months – the ministry of Jesus. Along the way, he will discover unlikely partners in ministry in the pursuit of justice. This is not always an easy process: he will be criticized by the people of his own faith for working, eating, and staying with what they consider to be the wrong kind of people. They will worry that, by reaching out to others, Jesus will water down their own faith; rendering many the things they hold dearly – their laws and customs – meaningless. But, he will not be deterred; for Jesus comes to open the eyes of the

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Barreto from *WorkingPreacher.com*

blind; to heal the sick and to feed the hungry; he comes to bring justice where it is has not yet been found.

One of the sayings that this week's conference preacher taught us is that – in the face of any kind of injustice; natural, societal, personal – 'don't hate it; see it.' In other words, we can only begin to address the brokenness of the world, and the injustices in our midst, when we know what is really before us; when we understand its true nature and magnitude.

For Christians, Epiphany is the season of light. This is when we take the time to explore the life and ministry of Jesus to see how God is present and at work in the world; in the midst of the injustices we encounter, offering strength and guidance, often coming in the form of unlikely partners who work together for a more *Compassionate Community*. Sometimes, the widening of our circles can be difficult; sometimes it's uncomfortable; but instead of hating – by resisting or stereotyping or ignoring – maybe God is asking us instead to follow the example of the young people among us and see it. May the light of Christ help our eyes to open. AMEN.