

The Rev. Steve Best
St. Thomas Church
12.22.19; Advent 4A
Is. 7:10-16; Rom.1:1-7; Matt.18-25

IMPOSSIBLE DREAMS

Have you ever thought that what God wanted you to do was impossible? Have you ever had an impossible dream? If you have, then today's Gospel story from Matthew is for you. It's full of surprises, challenges, and potential wrong turns. It's a different take on the birth of Jesus. It is a story that puts Joseph, rather than Mary, in the spotlight.

By contrast, in Luke's gospel, Mary is featured very prominently. She is the one who is visited by an angel during her waking hours, enjoys spiritual sisterhood with the also pregnant Elizabeth, and is given inspiring lines to sing that will ring through eternity: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

Mary, firmly on stage in the leading role in the nativity story and in most church Christmas pageants, we wonder if dear Joseph will be able to make an entrance? Will it only be a bit part or will he, too, have an important role in bringing about the great work of salvation that God has planned? The answer can be found in today's portrayal of the birth narrative as found in the gospel of Matthew. Surprisingly, Joseph is the one visited by an angel, not Mary.

So many wonderful and unexpected things arrive through our dreams. It should be no wonder that a whole school of psychology, psychoanalysis, is dedicated to the study and interpretations of dreams. Dreams are the royal road to our unconscious—a sacred place deeper than conscious awareness. It is the place where our defenses are less able to distort, deny, or destroy the deepest truths about selves, God and our relationship with him. It always pays to pay attention to our dreams.

The dream in which the angel arrives to Joseph is carefully unwrapped for us to see and inside it is the most surprising Christmas gift of all: the discovery that Joseph, in concert with Mary, will have a major role together in bringing a stunningly beautiful ray of hope into a darkened world, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to

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take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

It never ceases to amaze me how wonderful God’s gifts can be. The text doesn’t explicitly tell us if Joseph did his own version, separate from Mary, “of how can this be?” But I bet he did. How could he not given the circumstances? Living in a cultural context in which Mary’s suspicious pregnancy could easily have resulted in her being stoned to death, Joseph remains faithful to God, to his truth, and, of course, to Mary.

Perhaps it is helpful to note that Mary and Joseph were not simply engaged to be married in a way that we think of it in our modern times. They were “betrothed” which in ancient times meant you were just short of a marriage fully consummated. But Joseph doesn’t act as one who is trapped in a barren marriage but as one who lived with hope for a holy purpose that was larger than his own personal predicament and full of a determination to keep looking for a hint of God’s wonderful love in the presence of overwhelming uncertainty and impossibility.

As one commentator put it, “Joseph had no quickening in his belly to tell him that life had indeed been conceived without his flesh. He only dreamed dreams and that was enough to recognize that the dream that revealed the ultimate impossibility of God’s presence with us was in fact compelling enough to act decisively upon.

This morning I invite you to reflect upon the “impossibilities” in your life. Do you find yourself struggling with the impossibility of having faith in the presence of doubt or despair created by the death of a loved one, the hopelessness of a marriage gone dangerously sour, a family member than won’t speak to you this holiday season, a bleak financial situation or the continual pain of living in a deeply polarized country.

Whatever impossible situation you happen to be facing this Christmas, this morning’s good news is that through our dreams God will deliver us hope and the courage to act and even send us angelic messengers. And this hope in the face of overwhelmingly difficulty impossibilities is a profound gift that is received through a wide range of loving relationships that form our inner circles and communities of faith.

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This has always been my dream for all of you, and for me, in this family of faith here at St. Thomas. If you haven't found it yet, don't give up trying. Within the Body of Christ, hope is always more contagious than fear.

Now please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying this is all easy. I often have encountered impossibility but, by the grace of God, I haven't stopped dreaming of a better life, a braver church, a better society and world to live in. There was a time in my life—age 30 to be exact-- when I faced what I thought at the time was the impossibility of finding a wife who desired as much as I do to serve God in shared ministry. And here I am 30 years later, happily married to Jannie who has helped me face “impossibility” after “impossibility” as we have traveled through the ups and downs of our shared life together raising a child in a troubling world, overcoming cancer (both of us), and grieving the death of our beloved parents.

When I look at the story of Joseph and Mary, I see the beauty of sacramental love within marriage in motion. It also points to a sacramental love that can be found in deep friendships and any committed partnerships in ministry blessed through a shared baptism into the love of Christ. When we are faced with the many impossibilities in life, it is essential that we don't face it alone. Every great thing—every wonderfully spectacular thing-- that God calls us to do is impossible unless we find others to help, love, and support us. Christianity is first and foremost a communal religion.

Again, I invite all of you to reflect upon what new impossible thing you face in your life right now that might become wonderful and even glorious if you approach it from the perspective of renewed faith, hope, and love--which are the primary gifts we Christians should be looking for under our Christmas trees. I invite all of us to do the same kind of dreaming about our beloved community of St. Thomas. Now that all of the impossibilities surrounding our sanctuary and nave will soon be resolved (hopefully) and behind us (ok folks, full disclosure here I once believed the whole project was impossible and maybe some of you did too).

And now! And now! What new and exciting impossibilities will our “God-is-really-with-us Savior” have for us to encounter this Christmas and New Year? May God bless all of our impossible dreams until they become true! May all of us become God's impossible dreamers! Amen.