

“Joseph’s Faith and Herod’s Fear”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Isaiah 63:7-9

Matthew 2:13-23

Joseph sat up from his sleeping mat, his chest thumping, and sweat causing his locks of hair to stick to his forehead. His eyes still were seeing spots-- you know how it is, after looking at something intensely bright; even when the light goes away, the spots dance across your vision. But there was no light to be seen, none except for the moon, casting its blue glow upon Mary’s sleeping face. And the young child, Jesus, sleeping at her breast. Joseph could hear how their breathing patterned after one another, so calm, so peaceful. In a moment of coherence, Joseph realized what had woken him from his sleep, what had made his heart race and had dampened his face. Fear clenched him. It was an angel. But instead of announcing life, as the angel had when Joseph received the vision about Jesus’ birth, this angel was announcing death. Instead of telling Joseph “Do not be afraid,” this time the angel told Joseph, “Run for your lives.”

Herod. Joseph breathed the name in a whisper. That’s who the angels had warned him about. Strange, they had just been talking about Herod with those unusual guests who had visited several weeks ago from the East. Their aromas of spices and oils still filled the room. Joseph remembered the way they described the night sky, as if it were a book that could tell them all they needed to know about life. They pointed out the star that had led them to Jesus, and when they got there, they kneeled as if he was the king, joy creasing onto their faces. He recalled their laughter as they returned on a different path, to fool Herod. “What a fake! What a phony!” they called him as they recounted that Herod had asked for Jesus’ exact location and time of birth so that he could “worship the babe” too. It seems these wise ones had had dreams, too.

Joseph stared at the sleeping child, shaking his head. How can a man of power and voice such as Herod be threatened by a tiny child, still in diapers? Then again, Joseph remembered how fear had struck him upon his discovery that Mary was with child. He had made plans to quietly dismiss her-- he didn’t want to abandon her to those who would treat an unwed woman to the hurling of stones. Between those two options-- quiet dismissal or turning her in to the adultery police-- nothing else had occurred to him. There was simply no social template for making a family with a woman who had

gotten pregnant by God-knows-who. At least, not for a good and righteous Jewish boy like himself.

But then came that dream. The angel had told him to dream bigger, imagine better, and step up to holiness. And so, he chose faith over fear. He stayed with Mary and gave her and the baby what little he could offer. He couldn't even get them a room at the inn in his own hometown. But the glory and warmth that surrounded them there with the animals, and the odd assortment of guests who showed up to honor the child were better than even a palace could offer.

He trusted his dream then. He would do well to trust now. It was a fearful dream, but God had shown him that choosing faith will not disappoint. He decided they should leave while they could still be clothed in the shadows of darkness. He rolled over and gently shook the shoulder of the woman who was now, finally, his wife. "Mary," he said.

The Gospel According to Matthew tells us that Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled into the night from Bethlehem into Egypt. Perhaps the steps they took retraced the route another man named Joseph from many generations back took when he was sold into slavery in Egypt. That Joseph, from Genesis, dreamed dreams too-- dreams that helped him to rise from slavery to the high ranks of leadership in Pharaoh's economy. But generations passed, and another Pharaoh forgot how much Joseph had helped Egypt. Joseph's descendents had become slaves; the Pharaoh was like Herod of another time, trying to kill all the male babies to prevent an uprising. It was Moses, whose life was spared by several clever women, who led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness, so that they could live in the land God promised to them-- the land that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were fleeing to find safety in Egypt.

We do not get much information about Jesus' early years and formation in Egypt. The Talmud, made up of sayings of the ancient rabbis, suggest that Jesus grew up as a house servant in Egypt. A more contemporary theologian, Joseph Enuwosa, who teaches at a Nigerian university in Africa, notes that much of the ways Jesus taught and performed miracles through his ministry reflect common beliefs and practices in African spirituality. Though today there are many countries in Africa, and for thousands of years there have been many diverse tribes and cultures, there are some commonalities that Professor Enuwosa noted. One is the African tendency to teach in parables. The use of storytelling is an excellent tool for helping listeners grasp meaning in a way that embeds deeply within the soul. Professor Enuwosa also notes that in Africa, "there are encounters with demonic power, evil spirits, the reality of poverty and freedom or deliverance of the oppressed. Healings are done by use of herbs, saliva, tunic, prayer,

touching, words, incantations, water and sound.”¹ This sounds very familiar to the ways Jesus conducted his ministry as we know it.

I can imagine that if Jesus grew up seeing these things happen, his imagination had an advantage to those he had left behind in the hometown of his people. And when we can imagine something, we are more likely to be able to have the faith to do it than if we have never imagined it to begin with.

My grandmother was once given a dog-- a chihuahua-- by a friend. This was before I was born, but the dog became legendary in my family's canon of stories. My grandmother named the dog Jonathan, and the friend who had gifted my grandmother with the dog told her, "Make sure you teach him to say hello. He will learn if you work with him every day." Well, my grandmother took her friend seriously. She figured there must be something to that breed that should make them be able to talk. So, she worked with Jonathan, coaxing him with love and treats each day. Now, something you should know about my grandmother is this: she was the kind of person whose love felt so good that you would just about do anything for her. And I guess that feeling extended to her dog too, because it wasn't long before anyone coming to her kitchen door would be greeted by a tiny dog up on his hind legs, saying "Rerrooooh!"

Jesus grew to be one whose love feels so good that we should want to do just about anything for him. He causes our imaginations to expand, beyond the Herods who still threaten us with their fear today. He causes our hearts to grow to protect the weak and vulnerable, a Joseph did for Jesus when he was a baby, and touches our hearts to weep for those who do not escape the brutalities of Herod, as Rachel wept and continues to weep for generations of children who are sacrificed in the name of fear, greed, and the effort to stop holiness from happening. Jesus ignites our daring, calling us to stand with those who cross borders for safety, but also to cross borders ourselves, including the borders of what is expected of our roles as men or as women. Joseph, in his faith, did not act as society's rules demanded that a man act towards a woman who shows up pregnant before they are married; instead, he chooses compassion. He uses the male privilege his society granted him to protect Mary, and he trusted Mary to bring forth something, someone, holy. I can't imagine the amount of faith and imagination that must have required of him.

We are at a point when one year folds into another, and it is a good time for dreaming. What might the angels be calling you to do? How might your imagination stretch beyond

¹ Joseph Enuwosa, "African Cultural Hermeneutics: Interpreting the New Testament in a Cultural Context" in *Black Theology: An International Journal*. 21 April, 2015 p.87

the expectations that have been handed to you, in ways that allow you to be an agent of God's holy power? Can you trust God enough to turn your fear into faith?

To close this sermon, I want to ask that you participate in something we do with our child every night as we tuck her into bed, so that she can go to the land of dreams. It comes from the Ignatian spiritual practice called The Examen. The simplified version we do with Kai asks these three questions:

What is something that made you feel happy today?

What is something that made you feel sad today?

Where was God today?

Here is a more sophisticated version, and instead of looking at just one day, this prayer asks you to look at the whole year.

As I review the past 12 months, from a year ago through to the present moment –

What am I especially grateful for this year?

An event that took place?

Courage that I mustered?

Love and support I received?

I ask for the light to know God and to know myself as God sees me.

Where have I felt true joy this year?

What troubled me this year?

What has challenged me?

Where did I stumble into failure?

Where and when did I find an opportunity for renewal and pause?

Have I noticed God's presence in any of this?

In light of my review, what is my response to the God of my life?

As I look ahead, to the coming months what comes to mind?

With what spirit do I want to enter the next few months?, the next year?

I ask for God's presence and grace, for this spirit, as I enter the next year.

Resources:

Yearly Examen: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/annual-examen/>

Dream Worksheets:

<https://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/pdf/dreamjj.pdf>

<https://www.sleepadvisor.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Creativity-Sheets.pdf>