

Differing Dreams

Matthew 1:18-25

December 16, 2018

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church
1750 Virginia Road
San Marino, CA 91108
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185
www.smccpby.com • smcc@smccpby.com

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

“Not my dream,” she said to the other associate pastor when she was asked to participate in a planning meeting for the ministry to seniors. In fact, whenever someone has an idea for Jenny that she doesn’t like, she simply smiles and says “not my dream,” and it has a way of disarming and redirecting the conversation. She is the newest pastor on the staff of a large Lutheran Church, and thus with little political power to say “no.” Instead she simply declares it’s “not my dream” and shifts the conversation. It’s really very effective. In other words, there are other priorities that I need to embrace and “your dream” is “not my dream.”

We all have our own dreams of what life will look like in the future. We may see ourselves in a better place, attending the college of our dreams, or driving a better car, or living in a better house, or perhaps with a better boyfriend or girlfriend, or in better health, or with a better portfolio of investments. Dreams have a way of directing our efforts and keeping us focused. “Not my dream” is one way of limiting the dissipation of energy.

The Bible is full of stories of dreamers. There is the story of when Jacob left home and fell asleep on a rock dreaming that he saw a ladder reaching into heaven from the earth, so he named the place Bethel, which means house of God.¹ And then there is another Joseph (the one with a coat of many colors) who dreamt that his brothers were going to serve him.² What kid doesn’t dream once in a while about his siblings having to take their orders? As you know, that didn’t turn out so well for Joseph initially. His brothers were already fed up with him and the special favors their father extended to him, so they sold Joseph into slavery. And then there is Samuel who was working with Eli in the Temple.³ One night while he was sleeping he heard his name called on several occasions. He quickly went to Eli to inquire what he wanted but it wasn’t Eli who was calling. Finally the fourth time, Eli told him to respond, “Speak for your servant is listening.” The Lord was speaking to him in his sleep. Dreams can be powerful and difficult to understand.

1 Genesis 28:12

2 Ibid 37:5

3 Samuel 3:10

In the darkness of sleep, Joseph (the one who will take Mary as his wife and is present at the birth of Christ) lets go of his own dreams and begins to embrace the dream God has for him and for the entire world. He doesn't walk away from the controversy but instead chooses to believe that the Lord is in the midst of it somehow. Instead of washing his hands of the whole affair and pursuing a life with another wife who would preserve his reputation and standing, Joseph embraces the mess he finds himself in (through no fault of his own) and that mess becomes the birthplace of the Savior. How unexpected is that outcome! He may have started with "not my dream" but he eventually comes to embrace God's dream for him.

It can be overwhelming when our dreams are broken. When our minds spin out of control and even our sleep is fitful and restless, we become exhausted by the turmoil within us. But sometimes there is a blessing in that — because, finally, we let go of our efforts to control it all and we become more open, receptive, and willing to listen. In sleep Joseph is open and can do nothing more to make things right. His own dreams shattered, he hears of God's dream for the future instead. An angel tells him, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

"Don't be afraid." It's what is always said to people when God is intervening in their lives.

During World War II a young German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was asked to lead the Confessing Church Seminary in Finkenwalde. In opposition to the German Christian Church that had rallied to support the Nazi cause, Bonhoeffer lived and studied with the students, learning a great deal about a community of faith under threat. In his book entitled *Life Together* he writes,

"The serious Christian, set down for the first time in Christian community, is likely to bring with him a very definite idea of what Christian life together should be and try to realize it. But God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period **in a dream world.**" And then he goes on to claim, "He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a

destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”⁴

When our own dreams are shattered, it may actually be the beginning of something more wonderful than we imagined. Life is infinitely more complex than we think. It's not my dream of the church but God's dream of the church that matters most. I'm called upon to act in love towards the Christian community, to build it up, not to stand apart from it and criticize it because it doesn't live up to my dream of what it should be.

So Joseph wakes up one day to find his life wrecked, his fiancée pregnant, his trust betrayed, his future revoked, his name ruined, and his dreams shattered. Law and honor demanded that he break off the engagement. But to do so publicly on the grounds of infidelity would humiliate Mary and cause untold economic and social harm to her, so he decided to divorce her quietly — sort of an “irreconcilable differences” no-fault divorce. Then perhaps they could rebuild their lives in private.

It can be overwhelming when dreams are broken, and we struggle with fear and grief. When our minds spin out of control and even our sleep is fitful and restless, we become exhausted by the turmoil within us. We are tempted to divorce ourselves from it all. But sometimes there is a blessing in that because finally we let go of our efforts to control it all and we become more open and receptive. In sleep Joseph can do no more to make things right and is passive and open. His own dreams shattered, he hears of God's dream for the future instead. An angel tells him, “. . . do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”

We surely can recall a time when we felt like we were living a life we didn't bargain for, one we hadn't planned on. We can probably all relate to having our own plans for what we were going to do, and who we were going to become. But then waking up one day and finding our dreams broken too. We wonder how we ended up in this place or in this predicament. And sometimes when we are exhausted by our efforts to live in the midst of some mess that our lives have become we can faintly hear the voice of the Lord saying, “Don't be afraid. You are not alone. I am with you to the very end – even in the midst of this!” It may not be what you

⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1954) p.26-27

planned but the Lord can be found in the midst of life's messiness and may just be waiting for you to turn around and stop running away from it.

You see, Joseph has to actually do something. Mary's story is about something that happens to her, "Let it happen to me as you say," she responds. Her story is a more passive one. But Joseph had to take Mary as his wife and allow this alternative future to unfold, believing God was in it. Joseph had to take a stand and trust that there was no reason to be afraid because God would provide whatever was needed and Joseph could survive the humiliation and the loss of his honor.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary gets the attention but in Matthew's account it all hinges on what happens to Joseph. If Joseph awakes from his dream and believes the angel, everything's on. Mary will come home and have a family and her child will be born. But if Joseph doesn't believe — everything's off. If he awakes from his dream, shakes his head, goes to the courthouse and files divorce papers . . . then Mary's out, disgraced, or possibly disowned by her family. She would be left to scratch out a living however she can as a single mom, feeding herself and her illegitimate child on whatever she can beg, borrow, or steal. The fact is that the child is Joseph's until Joseph says otherwise. Whether or not the child is his biologically or not, according to Jewish law, the child becomes Joseph's when he says so, because the issue is not biological but legal. According to Matthew, Joseph's belief is as crucial as Mary's womb. It takes two parents to give birth to this remarkable child: Mary to give him life and Joseph to give him a name, Jesus, the son of David.

Many parents seem to get this. They know that there is joy in seeing your children become successful, like watching a rocket take off. When the launch is successful you don't care too much about how scorched you were on the launch pad during lift-off. Joseph is experiencing some early scorching as he gives up his own dream to embrace the dream God has for him and his family.

The truth is that each of us, like Joseph and Mary, have to be willing to believe the absurd proposition that God works in the mess of life and through our broken dreams. What we need is a faith like that of Joseph, who was able to live with paradox and incomplete understanding, rather than divorcing himself from it all, walking away from it in search of an easier life or a

larger, more glamorous role. The Spirit of the Lord still struggles to be born in us, not in spite of our imperfect lives and struggles, but in many ways through them in ways that contradict our preconceived ideas of what life should look like. The Christmas story is a mystery about God's intervention in life that invites us, like Joseph to participate in the dream the Lord has for the healing of the world. And the mystery includes the paradox that the birth of God requires human partners; Mary and Joseph, and you and me, all willing to believe the impossible — that our story is part of God's unfolding story of salvation.

The ordinary becomes bearer of the extraordinary in this story. What bigger vision is God inviting you to embrace this Christmas season? How might you participate in the Lord's plan for healing the world? God is with us in Jesus Christ, and is leading us toward a future with hope. Don't miss the gift of God's love in this season of scurrying about with so much to do. Leave room in your life for the dreams of what God may yet do.

Then maybe one day you'll be talking with a friend about a time you didn't think you were going to make it. Life was just too difficult. The decisions were just too hard. The journey back was so tough it wasn't worth it. And you'll tell of how you felt trapped by circumstances and could see no way out. And the friend will look at you and see that you are still breathing, still living, still going on with your life. And they may ask, "Well, what changed? How did you get through it? Was it really as rough for you as you say it was?" And you may answer, "Not my dream . . . Yes it was really that rough. I didn't think I was going to make it . . . But God was with me. Emmanuel!" Amen.