



Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

A sermon preached by
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Making A Difference

Dreams and Visions

Luke 1:26-41; 46-49, Matthew 1: 18-25

Archbishop Desmond Tutu tells a story from the Holocaust.

A Nazi guard was taunting his Jewish prisoner, who had been given the filthiest job, cleaning the toilets. The guard was standing above him looking down at him and said: Where is your God now?" The prisoner replies: "Right here with me in the muck." Tutu continues: "The tremendous thing that has come to me more and more is this recognition of God as Emmanuel, God with us...the God who is with us in the muck."

We Christians have always had a hard time swallowing the earthy flavor of the incarnation. Though God wants to snuggle up right next to our human skin, we want to keep God at a distance - far enough away to admire, but not close enough to be touched or to be changed.

The elaborate doctrine of the virgin birth did not come to fruition until the Middle Ages, and this idea is based primarily on today's story of the annunciation. We need to know that Isaiah's prediction that a "virgin shall conceive and bear a son" is an inaccurate translation of the original language. What in Greek reads as "virgin" was actually the more neutral "young girl" in the original Hebrew. Paul's letters make no mention of a virgin birth, or of Jesus' birth at all - and in a confusing twist, both Matthew and Luke trace the lineage of Jesus through Joseph - even though late developing tradition says that Joseph had nothing to do with the conception. Friends, what we have in scripture is a very confusing, ambiguous understanding of Jesus's roots.

Kathleen Norris reminds all of us that today's story from Luke is traditionally known as one of the "mysteries of the faith" - annunciation, incarnation, transfiguration, resurrection - powerful spiritual experiences that defy rational interpretation. In fact, if we try to *understand* mystery with our minds - we may miss the poetry that can only dwell in our hearts. Norris suggests that the annunciation story - the virgin birth metaphor - is at the heart of Christian vocation - what you and I understand to be our sacred calling - the unique purpose for which each one of us has been born. In all of us, she says, there is a virgin place in our souls, a *point vierge*, as Thomas Merton calls it, "...a point of pure truth...which belongs entirely to God. This little point..." is, according to Merton: "the pure glory of God in us." Or, to put it differently, it is the Holy Spirit conceiving within us the possibility...of our lives." (*Amazing Grace*, pp.74-75). In other words, my friends, we are all spiritual virgins, waiting for God to be conceived within us.

And so, for me, the doctrine of the virgin birth is not the point of the annunciation story. Because all things are possible with our God, Jesus may well have been conceived in what the Rman Catholic church calls the immaculate conception. But is that how our God would choose to become one with us? I think this doctrine may well have been an attempt by a confused early church to keep a fleshy God at a distance. For me, what the annunciation is about is not virginity but vision, not purity but gestation, not immaculate conception but vocational call. The message of Gabriel is not about a sexual encounter with the Holy Spirit. Rather Mary's encounter with Gabriel tells us what it means to give birth to what the Quakers call "that of God within you." Mary was every bit as ordinary, every bit as imperfect, every bit as filled with human urges as any of us are. And because God chose to gestate, to grow, to develop, to be born in her, so, too, God chooses to be born in you and in me.

There is a story about a little girl who was standing with her grandfather by an old-fashioned open well. They had just lowered a bucket to draw some water to drink, "Grandfather," asked the little girl, "where does God live?" The old man picked up the little girl and held her over the open well. "Look down into the water," he said, "and tell me what you see." "I see myself," said the little girl. "That's where God lives," said the old man. "God lives in you." (Mark Link)

My friends, the mystery of incarnation - of God becoming flesh - begins with Mary and it continues with us. This marriage of human and divine potential, this commingling of spirit and of matter - it is the embodiment of spiritual maturity - first in Mary and then in us. Yes, our vocation - our calling - as Christians, modelled for us by Mary is to make visible God's image in the world - to share our unique spark of holiness - with all of creation. And so, by God's grace we become partners in the work of creation.

Which brings us to Joseph, another ordinary human being called by God to do extraordinary things. According to tradition, Joseph was the strong silent type - an older carpenter who willingly submits to impotent fatherhood - a second string player in the drama of God's human birth. But according to scripture, Joseph's role is different. All that is actually recorded in the Bible is that Joseph is a dreamer - a righteous man who transforms the meaning of righteousness by taking his dreams seriously.

Now, to be righteous, according to Hebrew scripture, is to be law-abiding. And so, as a law-abiding Jew, Joseph could have Mary stoned to death - the punishment commanded in the twenty-first chapter of Deuteronomy if an engaged woman sleeps with other men. But, in the Torah, to be righteous also means to be merciful - so Joseph, a man of compassion, decides that instead of stoning, he will dismiss Mary as his wife, quietly.

What never occurs to Joseph is that there is yet another way to be righteous - the way of mystery, the way of surprise, the way of acceptance and trust and grace. Joseph, all on his own, can't imagine how God might be present in so difficult and embarrassing a situation as Mary's pregnancy. And so, God has to help Joseph.

In the deep darkness of sleep, God comes to Joseph, God speaks to Joseph in a dream, God brings truth into the irrational depths of Joseph's heart. In ways more mysterious than the mind can imagine, God changes Joseph. And Joseph becomes a partner and a channel of God's grace in the world.

Seventy times in scripture, God becomes real and present through dreams and visions – sleep dreams, daydreams, intuition, and visitations. Adam, Noah, Moses, Jacob, Joseph, Ruth, Isaiah, David, Daniel, Ezekiel, Eli, Samuel, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary, Paul, Ananias, Peter, John. These earthly, needy, confused people become co-creators with God - hearing God and enfleshing God in their lives. How? By listening to and honoring their dreams and visions and intuitions.

Scientists, of course, have discovered the presence of night dreams in the sleep of every single human being – an average of an hour and a half each night. If you are like me, you don't remember most of your dreams. But whether we remember them or not, dreams are truth for us, because they uncover the world of our unconscious self – the memories, feelings, anxieties, possibilities that our mind rarely acknowledges. Yes, dreams, visions, hunches are the way we discover the full image of God that rests deeply within each one of us. Our dreams and visions are windows into our soul.

And so, Joseph dreams. And what he discovers is that Mary's baby is not a disgrace, not an embarrassment, not a problem, but instead the very hope for himself and for the world. Joseph dreams, and what he discovers is that he can behave in a new way, that he *must* behave in a new way. Joseph's dream invites him – practical, solid Joseph – to become a partner with God in mystery. Not understanding, but trusting, Joseph wakes up. With courage, he risks new behavior. And so, Joseph assists in giving Birth to God – a new God for a very old world. Such is the power of dreams.

Where are your dreams and visions this day? Is the unconscious voice of God whispering to you in your heart, in your sleep, in your feelings, in your hunches? What is the restlessness which is stirring you up and unsettling your settled life? What is it that God is trying to say to you in the secret parts of who you are? How can you this day, this year, sink into your dreams and greet new visions, trusting them and following them, so that God can be born in you - so that God can be born through you - into this world of woe?

These stories of visions and dreams, of a peasant mother and a stoic father – this ancient tale about a baby God finding a home in our world – none of it makes much sense. But God is born anyway. You see, my friends, Christmas is not about fact or fiction. Christmas is about incarnation - God's dream becoming flesh. Christmas is God's invitation for each one of us to experience in our inner-most selves the coming together of the human and the divine, to sense the possibilities of our own living – to sense the possibilities of healing the world.

The great medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, once said: "We are all meant to be mothers and fathers of God. For God is always needing to be born."

May it be so, for you and for me. Amen.