

Dream Interpretation

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Matthew saw fit to include a sequence of dreams near the beginning of his account of the Good News. Five times in these early episodes an angel speaks through night time visions.

- In a dream Joseph is encouraged to enter into marriage with Mary (1.20)
- In a dream the Magi are told to avoid Herod on their return journey (2.12)
- In a dream Joseph is warned to leave Bethlehem (2.13)
- In a dream Joseph is notified that Herod is dead and the coast is clear, sort of (2.19)
- In a dream Joseph is directed to Galilee to raise the family (2.22)

All this dream work, curious is it not? So today we will consider divine dreams: what they tell us about God, what they tell us about Jesus, ways our dreams link us to the Great Spirit.

Dreams tell us about God

Matthew's birth narrative opens with a bit of background: Joseph and Mary **were engaged** (μνηστευθείσης), Mary **was found** (εὑρέθη) to be with child, Joseph **had decided** (ἐβουλήθη) to divorce her quietly. All this is stated in the aorist passive voice: a verb tense. It is all past tense and all passive. Matthew has included this information to get us up to speed, and now things happen. "[T]he first action plotted in the story occurs, and it is an act of God, who sends an angel to speak to Joseph in a dream" (M. Eugene Boring, "Gospel of Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (v1 VIII), p. 134). Time and time again in these first episodes we find God directing the drama through dreams. It is God who takes the initiative in the salvation story: not Joseph, not Mary, not magi, not Herod. We may have been taught that the story is about Mary, Joseph, or even Jesus, but the text suggests otherwise. This is God's story. The first miracle of Matthew's gospel belongs to God, not Jesus (*Ibid.*). What do dreams tell us about God?; that waiting for God's dream, a miracle, to be worked within us sometimes takes patience.

Joseph was ready to take action, but it had more to do with his discomfort than with God's leading. We, too, are sometimes quick to act. We are taught and told to make our own future, to realize our potential, to work hard towards the dreams that **we** have. But what about God's dream? It is exceedingly difficult to wait. Perhaps I have offered this story previously, but the important episodes in our lives are worth sharing more than once. I was in the last half year of my MCC term in Germany and I was intent to find another voluntary service placement. This impulse had some to do with a good heart, but had much more to do with not being relegated back to the family farm for the fall harvest. This prospect felt like a prison sentence with little hope of future parole. Don't get me wrong—I love country living and even farm life, but I simply lack farming aptitude. I was looking for volunteer positions in Germany, in the States, in Canada—but nothing came through. 10-15 interviews and no one would have me; demoralizing and terrifying all in one. The worst case scenario began to unfold: I returned Stateside with nothing in place. And then God's dream began to take shape and something miraculous fell in place, but that is another story for another time. The upshot is that I am, most of us are, eager to put plans in place, take the bull by the horns, get it done. Some of this drive is commendable. It is also true that at times our

over-functioning has much to do with our fears and gets in the way of God's dream for us which often takes time to unfold. We who are programmed to control our world need the gentle reminder that it is God's story of salvation. God does, and will, take initiative. Joseph's dream tells us that God acts in the lives of righteous people. The mark of the righteous, in Matthew's birth narrative and his gospel as a whole, is the one who acts on God's dream. Like Joseph let us plan for the future, and also plan that at the first sniff of a "God dream" we will change course. On the other end of the spectrum from the go-getter we find the passive.

What do dreams tell us about God?; that God also offers guidance to those overwhelmed with the stuff of life. It happens that sometimes, like Joseph and Mary in the opening sentences of the birth narrative, we feel stuck in a passive voice. Over achieving ancestors, unexpected pregnancies, insomnia punctuated with fear inducing dreams, death threats, frequent moves, a kid with a God complex—these are all burdens of Joseph alluded to in our Matthew text. If it were not for Divine direction I wonder if Joseph would have had the emotional energy to make any decision. Dysfunctional family and friends burst upon us putting us in a passive voice. Our own health issues and wounded family members incapacitate us. Death—a relationship, a friend, a loved one—numbs us. It is overwhelming! It is good for us to remember that in these moments God acts. Sometimes a dream takes hold of us in the dark nights. Sometimes a star shines over us. Sometimes strangers bring gifts. God offers us salvation, in part, by simply coming to dwell with us: Emmanuel, God-with-us. A dream grows within us and we are propelled in unexpected directions. A dream grows in others and we find ourselves surrounded by people we would not have imagined. God acts even when we feel reduced to passivity and held hostage to the past.

What do dreams tell us about God?; that God desires mercy, not sacrifice (Matt 12.7). Mary and Joseph were engaged. This "was a binding arrangement between people already considered to be husband and wife, so that unfaithfulness was considered adultery...The Law of Moses required capital punishment in such cases (Dt 22.23-27). By Matthew's time, this had been mitigated by rabbinic practice, but the penalty was still severe and humiliating. The first and only thing said about Joseph's character is that he is "righteous", a key word in Matthew's theology, which can also be translated "just". In Matthew's setting, to be righteous or just mean[t] to live by the law, God's revealed will. Joseph, contrary to the behavior expected of one who is "just" had already decided not to go by the letter of the law, but chose out of consideration for Mary to divorce her quietly" (ibid). Joseph is "righteous" because he acted merciful. Jesus echoes this divine sentiment numerous times in his ministry. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" we hear later in the Beatitudes (5.7). God desires mercy, not sacrifice, we hear in chapter 12. It is the mercy of the righteous sheep who clothe the naked, who visit the imprisoned, who feed the hungry, that will allow them to inherit the kingdom (25.46). It is not the scribes who sought to follow the letter of their Torah or the Pharisees who exploited the law for their own power and prestige who inherit the kingdom, but rather the merciful (see Matt 23:1-36). "For Matthew, active deeds of righteousness are an integral part of faithfulness. Joseph is an example of the genuine, active righteousness Matthew commends. Like the others mentioned in the genealogy, Joseph acted in a manner not expected by the social mores of his

times...Joseph acted out of mercy in the cause of justice, not out of ritual obedience in the cause of conventional piety” (Alyce M. McKenzie’s *Matthew* as a part of the Interpretation Bible Studies, p. 16).

So, dear friends, let us interpret and apply the teachings of our Bible with great mercy. Our posterity to be named righteous and just depends not on our preaching of mercy but on our merciful actions. More importantly, though, our ability to perceive mercy in our own lives depends on our ability to extend mercy (5.7). We inherit the kingdom, we inherit Christ, Christ is born in us, when we practice mercy. The dream of God tells us that much is lost without mercy.

Dreams tell us about Jesus

The dreams of Matthew 1 & 2 also provide insight how Matthew understands Jesus. This is accomplished through a deft connection to Israel’s history. Take, for example, the name of the man engaged to Mary: Joseph. Do some of us remember another Joseph in the Biblical story? Maybe Joseph son of Jacob who is centre stage of the salvation story described in Genesis 37-50? That Joseph was famous for dreaming. His dreams got him sent to Egypt. His dreams saved his people from famine. His dreams saved all manner of refugees from Palestine and Africa. His dreams prepared the way for the Hebrew exodus out of Egypt into the Promised Land (Gen 50.24). Here in Matthew’s Gospel we have another Joseph who dreams. His dreams also got him sent to Egypt. The child of his dreaming, Jesus, would also feed hungry souls (Matt 15.32-38). The child of his dreaming would also shelter all manner of refugee throughout the world (Matt 28.19). The child of his dreaming was also to lead his people, and all people, out of bondage into a good and Promised Land. It might be significant to mention at this point that the angel directs Joseph to name the boy Jesus. This is significant in that the Hebrew translation of the Aramaic name “Jesus” is “Joshua”. And Joshua, if we remember our Jewish history, is the one who led the children of Israel into the Promised Land. When not used as a proper name Joshua itself means “deliver”. The intentional use of names and dreams ties the story of Jesus into the larger salvation history of God.

And if we failed to pick up on these connections we find copious O.T. citations throughout Matthew’s Gospel. Out of concern for time I arranged the scripture reading to skip from dream reference to dream reference in Matt 1 & 2. The first reading ends, though, by referring to “the prophet”. Well, the prophet or prophets are mentioned four more times around the scriptures I asked to be read. When biblical authors repeat words we ought to pay attention. And Matthew continues frequent quotation of the law and prophets throughout his Gospel. This is a subtle way of saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of O.T. expectations: he comes not abolish the Law and Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt 5.17). Matthew links together the ancient dream of God with Jesus the Christ to help us understand how this dream gets applied. The dream of God is not new, and Jesus becomes the template for how it gets lived.

Finding our Dream in God’s Dream

Some dreams we have come from God or resonate with God’s dream, but not all. Some night time dreams, for example, are a result of indigestion from that gluttonous Christmas dinner or eggnog gone bad. Some dreams we have are more a by-product of the culture and families of which we are apart. The American and Canadian dream, for example, has relatively little to do with the fulfillment of God’s dream. Yet some dreams are truly gifts from God which can save us, which can give light to those walking in darkness, which can offer healing. “God dreams” can be amazing things.

Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream—a dream that one day people would be known by the content of their character not the colour of their skin. That dream, that God dream, continues transforming racism in America. Justice Murray Sinclair has had a dream that there might be a new chapter in reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people. "A period of change is beginning," said Sinclair, "that if sustained by the will of the people, will forever realign the shared history of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Canada." "Change, of course, will not be immediate. It will take years, perhaps generations." This is part of the dream Justice Sinclair has received and righteously followed.

I conclude with a few simple questions: what dreams, what passions, do we have? How is God moving in these dreams to promote merciful and just living? Who needs to hear about the dreams God is growing within us? How are we listening carefully and supportively of the dreams others in the community have been given? May the Divine dreaming continue. Amen.

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