

Sunday, December 22, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Miracle and Parable”

Do you trust your dreams? Have you ever had an experience like Joseph?

Faced with a major decision, you play the pros and cons over and over in your mind until you finally fall asleep.

Then, from the deepest recesses of your subconscious a solution comes to you.

You wake up, knowing what you have to do.

I think that God talks to us like this all of the time.

What happens when we sleep; what we dream, is one of the few frontiers that we have yet to be able to wrest from God’s control.

We wake from dreams and ponder what it means – though we often forget quickly what has transpired.

I think we should trust our dreams.

When we sleep, we let our defenses down.

We stop worrying about what everyone around us is thinking.

We surrender.

I thank God for sleep.

It is perhaps the only time in our day that we are not subject to the influence of outside sources – although of course sleep experts will tell you that your environment has a tremendous impact on your ability to sleep—but I mean once you really fall asleep.

Matthew wants us to consider the possibility that God will communicate with us through angels and dreams.

Matthew, however, doesn't want Joseph or any of us to get stuck in the dream.

He wants to bring us back down to earth, back to our waking reality, by invoking the name of Emmanuel.

It is important to note that when the writer of Matthew’s gospel wanted to capture the meaning of Christmas, the meaning of the Christ event, the meaning of Jesus in a single word, he did a very wise thing.

He reached back into the Old Testament, pulled out an old word, a word that was familiar to the people, and used it to convey the message. The word was Emmanuel...

Emmanuel, God-with-us is the promise of God's eternal presence.

When God is with us, within us, we are fortified to face the challenges that the world might offer.

When we understand the gift of Emmanuel, then we realize we don't have to go anywhere to meet God.

God is present in the reality of our own lives.

We don't have to go find God in some other realm because God has already found us in exactly this realm and this world.

One commentator described it this way:

Emmanuel is God-with-us in the cancer clinic and in the local nursing home.

Emmanuel is God-with-us when the pink slip comes and when the beloved child sneers, "I hate you!"

Emmanuel is God-with-us when you pack the Christmas decorations away and, with an aching heart, you realize afresh that your one son never did call over the holidays.

Emmanuel is God-with-us when your dear wife or mother stares at you with an Alzheimer's glaze and absently asks, "What was your name again?"

God with us – *Emmanuel* – the word is a prayer.

Matthew wants us to learn from Joseph to trust God.

He wants us to pay attention, to look to God for help.

When life gets difficult, Matthew wants us to pray.

When life gets hard, what do you do?

Do you give up? Do you swear?

Do you lash out in hostility? Do you try to find someone to blame?

Do you give in to bitterness? Do you run away?

Do you hide behind some illness? Do you drug yourself?

Or, do you pray?

Seventeenth century monk, Brother Lawrence wrote

“That his prayer was nothing else but a sense of the presence of GOD, his soul being at that time insensible to everything but Divine love: and that when the appointed times of prayer were past, he found no difference, because he still continued with GOD, praising and blessing Him with all his might, so that he passed his life in continual joy.”

Do you consider your problems prayerfully and then listen for God?

That’s what Joseph did, and it worked.

What a great lesson to learn from Joseph: the art of listening!

Maybe this is why Jesus went often into the wilderness alone to do some praying and listening.

Perhaps he learned from father Joseph how to listen for God’s will.

It is important that we learn to rely on God, that we allow ourselves to seek guidance.

We are not meant to function all alone.

We are created by God, loved by God and God is with us.

Tony Robinson, writing for the Still Speaking devotional earlier this week made this point in a parable about a woman who was a choir director and music teacher for her entire professional life:

If there came a time in a performance when things started to go awry--the accompanist was off-beat, or the sections were drifting from each other--the natural reaction of choir members was to hunker down, to concentrate really hard, each on his or her own music.

Usually this made things worse, as each person focused so intently on their own part they forgot to look up.

The choir director wanted to yell over the music, 'JUST LOOK UP! I CAN HELP!'

But in the middle of the piece she just had to trust that the choir members would eventually lift their gazes of their own accord."

When things start to go awry in our own lives, we too are likely as not to hunker down.

We do what we have been doing only harder, with more determination.

We focus on ourselves and forget to LOOK UP to see what is important, to regain perspective, to find guidance and strength in God.

This is the message of Matthew’s Christmas story.

God came to Mary and Joseph – broke into their everyday lives and chose them for something incredible.

We must be open to God’s coming – we must prepare a place for Emmanuel.

In one of Wendell Berry’s *Sabbath Poems*, he uses the phrase “miracle and parable” to describe the beauty of the blossoming woods in Springtime.

I think these two words together are the crux of our Christmas story.

Joseph and Mary’s experience was a miracle. There is no explanation – that is the beauty of miracles – they move us to faith.

We are forced, in a way to believe in a power greater than our own.

How Jesus and Mary responded to the miracle is a parable.

Their story, like so many of the biblical stories, provide us with an illustration and understanding of what happens to people’s lives when they trust God.

A selection from Berry’s poem:

Miracle and parable

Exceeding thought, because it is

Immeasurable; the understander

Encloses understanding, thus

Darkens the light. We can stand under

No ray that is not dimmed by us.

The mind that comes to rest is tended

In ways that it cannot intend:

Is borne, preserved, and comprehended

By what it cannot comprehend.

Your Sabbath, Lord thus keeps us by

Your will, not ours. And it is fit

Our only choice should be to die

Into that rest, or out of it.

And so, my friends, Advent ends. It is time for Christmas – time for new birth and new beginnings.

Time for the joyous celebration of the birth of our Savior.

Open your hearts and make room, for whether miracle or parable, it is time for Emmanuel.