

Dreams, dreams, dreams-

Oh Honey you’ll never believe what I dreamt last night!” - said the excited woman to her husband as she awoke on a day like today--2 days before Christmas--“I dreamt you gave me a pearl necklace! --“What do you think it means?”

“Oh!” said her husband, “You’ll know the day after tomorrow.”

The next morning the woman awoke and declared the same thing: “Honey, I dreamt you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas, what do you think it means?”

“You’ll know tomorrow”-was all her husband said.

Then on Christmas morning, once again, the woman awoke and said:“I dreamed again that you gave me a pearl necklace for Christmas, what do you think the dream means?”

Her husband smiled and said, “You’ll know tonight.”

And that evening, when the man came home, his wife came rushing to the door--He held out a small package for her--She was overwhelmed and delighted as she quickly opened it--and inside the box she found a book!

It’s title: “The Meaning of Dreams.” (Samuel Candler)

Of course, this meant that the 12 days of Christmas in that household were probably spent with the man sleeping on the couch--or had this happened at our household, accommodations would have been little more than a snow bank.

Dreams, dreams, dreams-

Dreams, and their meanings-

They are abundant themes for you and me at this time of year-

Dreams like faithful Joseph’s, the step-dad and chief custodian of the infant Jesus—

It’s his dream we hear about in this morning’s Gospel--It is his dream that has us shocked and amazed--That God would come to this humble, older gentleman—

That God would speak to this pensioner turned parent--And as remarkable as this is--it’s not what’s most amazing--

What’s most amazing for Joseph and Mary and for you and me--is not that Joseph received divine, supernatural guidance -- but that Joseph actually listened to it.

Our text this morning is one of the two birth narratives we find in the Bible.

These narratives are in Matthew and Luke -- who are the only two writers (out of 27 books in the New Testament) -- who refer to Jesus’ birth and early life --

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Without these two we would have no idea about what this time in the life of Jesus was like -- indeed, we would have no Christmas.

If the Grinch stole it, Matthew and Luke came to the rescue--and gave it back.

As many of us know there remains great debate among biblical scholars regarding the literal authenticity of these texts -- certainly the attestation by just two witnesses -- who penned these stories rather late in the game -- fuel the fires of debate-

We still ask questions like:

Did a virgin really give birth?

Is it God's nature - to defy nature? Etc.

While this debate is certainly worthwhile -- and deserves our examination, instead, you and I focus on what Advent asks of us this morning—

The really important questions about the birth stories are not whether Jesus was born of a virgin -- or whether or not there was this huge government census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem -- or even whether there was this Eastern star that inspired the Three Kings to become history's first Christmas shoppers!

...the important questions are, what do these images mean?

'Is Jesus, Lord?' and if so, what does this mean to you and me?" (Marcus Borg)

What does God's willingness to leave heaven -- and come down to earth as "one of us" -- [like a stranger on the bus] -- have to do with our lives?

And if this God has done this -- is this God still doing this?

Just as the Word of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream -- Is the Word of the Lord still coming to you and me?

If so, what's being said?

Are we trying to listen?

As we all know, the major theme of Advent is preparation, pausing, -taking time to consider the voice of the Lord in our lives -

And as we've been concentrating on here at St. David's -- preparing places to ask ourselves, what do we really want for Christmas?

We've been coming to our darkened, purple-veiled worship space to help us step back and take a break from the incredible busy-ness that surrounds us as we take part in our Christmas preparations.

And now, this morning - we see the trees are up -- All 4 Advent wreath candles are lit -- And for just one more Sunday you and I are holding off -- we are holding off as a spiritual discipline to take time to cultivate in our hearts the discipline of Joseph -- the discipline of a soft and measured, patient and pensive listening --

For if St. Joseph tells you and me anything this is morning it is this: As we prepare for this mysterious baby to be born -- listen.

Don't be shocked if we hear something new, or different, or far out -- just listen.

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For Joseph, more than anyone else knows -- that in the silence of Advent -- God speaks.-- and God is still speaking.

A story from the East:

“Where shall I look for Enlightenment?” - asked to seeker of the Master -

“Here.” Was the Master's response.

“When will it happen?” Came the follow up question -

“It is happening right now.” Said the Master.

“Then why don't I experience it?”

“Because you do not look.”

“What should I look for?”

“Nothing, just look.”

“At what?” Said the frustrated seeker.

“Anything your eyes alight upon.” Said the Master.

“Must I look in a special kind of way?”

“No, the ordinary way will do.”

“But don't I always look in the ordinary way?”

“No, you don't.” Said the Master.

“Why ever not?”

“Because to look you must be here --“and you are mostly somewhere else.”

Joseph, dear Joseph does not speak one word in the New Testament -- But were he here this morning, he might ask you and me this: Where are we this morning?

Are we here, or somewhere else?

To you and me, frustrated and frazzled super-shoppers -- stuffed-straw manikins for the slings and arrows of outrageous commerce, office parties and family obligations-

Two days before Christmas is not exactly perfect timing for Advent's subtle chiding to listen before we speak or act -- to break away from the clamor and the clutter -- to remind ourselves that God is speaking to us -- through everything that is happening to us, through us, and around us -- right here and right now.

And if we are making ourselves too busy to listen -- what are we too busy doing?

And do we really want to spend the entire dinner party in the kitchen -- O.C.D.-ing over the perfect meal -- if it means that our beloved and honored guest spends the entire night seated at the dinner table, all alone?

Is this really what we want for Christmas?

Like Joseph, wouldn't we really prefer to hear our guest's voice?

Wouldn't we rather listen to what our guest has to say?

Ya, we would.

I heard that Guest speak just the other day -- The voice of the Lord came to me -- Guess where?

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Target!

No, not over the PA system – thank God -- But as I was waiting in the check-out line.

I had gone there to buy a replacement coffee pot for the one that had been cracked -- and subsequently rendered useless at the Yaw household -- forcing my wife to come up with some rather creative and questionable “work-arounds”-- including plastic measuring cups and flammable hot pads --that worried us both about resulting fires that our non-existent smoke alarms would surely never detect.

So in line, at Target, at 8:30 at night -- with my new coffee pot -- with hundreds of my closest friends -- who sat frumpy and frustrated behind their overloaded carts -- I resolved to do more than simply tally the number of people in the checkout lines to my right and left -- to make sure I had chosen the quickest line -- I’m sure nobody else here does that... And instead I reached for that dog-eared magazine -- that eye-candy of all pop publications known as People Magazine.

Inside was a surprise.

Inside was this article that had me thinking for days -- It was a series of interviews with people and families who had decided that they were going to live on much less than they earned.

There was the California engineer who makes \$200,000 a year -- but who had decided, with his wife, that they would live on \$38,000 a year -- and donate the rest to charity -- most of it going to church.....don’t worry, I sent them a pledge card.

Then there was the middle-age mother who received a \$525,000 inheritance -- and who gave more than \$400,000 to charity --

We can see why a whole article was devoted to these freaks -- because in a country whose savings rate is now negative -- they certainly stand out.

What right do they have to go against the wisdom of the popular culture? -- forfeiting lives of conspicuous consumption -- and choosing to drop right out of the rat race -- and not to listen to the siren calls -- “Oh, you have to live in a bigger place not because you need it but because you can -- “You have to drive a nicer car, not because you need one but because you can --

The voice of the Lord spoke inspiration to me-

The voice of the Lord spoke collegiality to me-

The voice of the Lord spoke courage to me-

You see, every one of us, every Christian, wants to hear that still, small voice -- maybe more than anything else -- this wisdom is what we really want for Christmas -- whether in dreams and department stores-

Help us, O Lord, to listen to Your voice.

So how do we do this?

How do we discern God’s voice.

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I've heard one priest says it's primarily a practice of asking the right questions -- of asking “God-questions” instead of “I-questions.”

Can you and I think of a big decision ahead of us this morning?

Can we think of a big decision in 2008?

Is it something we're still not clear on -- something we're looking for direction on-

How about approaching it by asking ‘God-questions’ instead of ‘I-questions?’

Here's what is meant:

“I-questions” are those that are centered around ourselves --

“What am I going to do?”

“Where am I going to live?”

“Who am I going to be?”

“I” is at the center of these questions.

They are questions guided by our needs for self-actualization and self-entitlement.
(Frederick Schmidt)

How about asking God-questions instead -- questions that have to do with what God is up to in our lives and all around us:

So the questions are asked from a different perspective -- a bird's-eye perspective:

“What does God want me to do?”

“How would God direct me in this matter -- as just one part of God's beautifully intricate world?”

“Who would God have me to be?”

“God-questions shift our focus -- by helping us understand where we fit into the larger economy of God's hope for the world. (Diane Butler Bass)

It is no surprise that what we are ultimately looking for -- peace, contentment, and joy -- always seem to come from the answers we get, not from I-questions, but from God-questions.

One of the great gifts of Advent is that it seeks to give us time to ask God-questions.

It tries to give us time to breathe -- and time to remember anew that great truth that we all hold so dear -- that God is alive -- that God is trying to speak with us.

The baby who we honor tomorrow is not dead -- but very much alive in resurrected glory -- and looking to do what all living people do -- Talk -- talk to us.

There's a text in the Hebrew Scriptures in which a prophet was trying to hear from God -
- and the prophet listened in the windy storm -- and the prophet listened as the earth quaked -- but the voice of the Lord only came at a time when it was not expected -- The voice of the Lord was only discernable in the silence.

Why are we so scared of silence.

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Even in corporate worship -- we want to fill every moment with sound -- Maybe because it keeps us in control -- or at least gives us the illusion of control -- whereas silence puts us out of control.

Ever notice that the angel spoke to Joseph in a dream -- at a time when he was not in control.

We like "sound" -- Even though we all know it can be our enemy -- in the times that it blocks us from hearing the voice of God.

So Advent asks us -- St. Joseph asks us:

Where do you and I need to make more room for silence in our lives?
For places that put us out of control, and put the Spirit in control?

Can we go for a walk -- can we turn off the car radio?

How can we place ourselves in places where we can listen to the voice of the Lord?

Check out our bulletin cover -- if you have it, take a look-

It's Guido Reni's famous 17th century depiction -- of Joseph and Jesus --

I am particularly fond of this one -- because Jesus' father looks more like a grand-father or great-grand-father-

This tells me that listening for the voice of the Lord may come easier as I get older-

It also tells me that no matter how old I get, I can still listen for the voice of the Lord-

It tells me that this humble man, with a humble faith that defied words -- said all he ever had to say without speaking a word -- he did it all by listening-

-so let's take a few moments-

-and look at this picture, and ask ourselves how we might go and do likewise.

Lessons:

Isaiah 7:10-16,

Romans 1:1-7,

PS. 80:1-7, 16-18,

Matthew 1:18-25