

## **To (Not) Divorce Her Quietly**

### **Matthew 1:18—25**

The rumor mill is already in full swing. The idol factory is up and running. And yet, today, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we're talking about dreams—subversive, life-changing, death-defying dreams. And just in case there's anyone out there who discounts the authority and the audacity of dreams, Matthew's Gospel has this cautionary tale. Or maybe it's an invitation. Either way, let's consider the possibilities. A first century carpenter dreams; can we? A man with a convoluted family history dreams; can we? A fiancée, whose betrothed to a young girl, who is lucky to have him, dreams; can we?

“There are times when all the world's asleep...” That's a lyric from the 1970's rock group *Supertramp*, and the reason I mention it just now is how dreams function, not just for the biblical figures like Joseph, but for everyone who's paying attention. And what our dreams are saying is often counter-cultural and subversive—which means that if there's an alternative to the rumor mill and to the closed systems of morality that keep us in line, it's going to come in a dream:

When I was young, it seemed that life was so wonderful  
A miracle, oh, it was beautiful, magical  
And all the birds in the trees, well they'd be singing so happily  
Oh, joyfully, oh, playfully watching me  
But then they sent me away to teach me how to be sensible  
Logical, oh, responsible, practical  
And then they showed me a world where I could be so dependable  
Oh, clinical, oh, intellectual, cynical  
There are times when all the world's asleep  
The questions run too deep  
For such a simple man...

Joseph, you see, is a simple man. And he's been to Bible School, which can be a dangerous thing. And he's a man of good morals. As far as Joseph knows, the best thing to do in life is keep your head down, work hard and do what's right. For him, it's that simple. And so, it's very likely that when the marriage between Joseph and Mary is arranged by the families, there's nothing to see here—no scandal to see here. Until there is. Mary's pregnant and just now beginning to show. You and I are pregnant and just now beginning to show. So what do we do?

Well, one option is that we sleep on it. Everybody has to sleep. Sleep is one of God's good gifts. According to Genesis 2:21, before Adam meets and marries Eve, ***“God caused a deep sleep to fall on the man...”*** Abraham, in Genesis 15:12, experiences ***“a deep sleep and a terrifying darkness”*** just prior to God establishing a covenant with his children and with his children's children. Among those offspring, you may recall, is another 'Joseph'—the one with the technicolor dream-coat, the one from Genesis 37—44, who is originally sold into slavery by his own brothers—the one who goes from being a household slave, to a victim of sexual abuse, to imprisonment, and who then wins the favor of Egypt's Pharaoh for interpreting dreams. Dreams, you see, may be psychologically relevant in an individual's personal therapy, but they're also notorious for making huge differences in a community of faith. The Joseph of Genesis is eventually reconciled with his brothers, reunited with his father, saves the Hebrew people from famine and weeps so loudly in Genesis 45:2 that *“the household of Pharaoh”* hears his cries and begins to gossip. An entire rumor mill is set in motion around dreams. But unless we pay attention to our own God-given dreams, the rumor mill is going to chew us up and spit us out.

Now, since I've mentioned the 'rumor-mill' a couple times already, I wanted to offer two literary references to help us get in touch with what we're up against, and why dreams like those of Joseph about Mary, the mother of Jesus, can spare us from its grinding morality. The first comes from Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, in which a precocious, young girl in Edwardian England has run off with an army officer, named Mr. Wickham. Lydia is now a scandal to her family; and everyone's upset because, in that culture at that time, women *had to* marry well, or they would become destitute. Anyway, the clergyman in the story is named Mr. Collins, and when he writes Lydia's father, I'm afraid he hasn't had a dream in years:

"My dear Sir, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Collins, and myself all agree that this shameful act by one daughter will ruin the fortunes of the others, as no respectable family will now wish to associate with the Bennets. My advice to you, dear Sir, is to console yourself, cast off your unworthy child entirely, and let her face the consequences of her heinous crime. I have already communicated the details to Lady Catherine, who shares my sentiments, and we both feel it a great relief that I am no longer connected to your family through marriage."

God help us! This is how Jane Austen and others portray the Christian faith. So maybe we can appreciate the problem. It's on-going. The rumor mill is tenacious. And unless we're willing to dream, it will chew us up. In a more recent, twentieth-century novel, *The Cider House Rules*, John Irving describes the arduous work that takes place during the apple harvest in Maine. A group of poor African American workers, one Hispanic, and one orphaned white boy, named Homer, are bedding down in their bunks for the night. The situation is complicated because a young woman, named Arthur Rose, has discovered that she's pregnant by her own father; and with her anxious choice to abort the fetus, emotions are running high. Then, someone notices a piece of paper with a list of rules they'd never quite noticed before.

Homer reads it aloud: “*Don’t smoke in bed... Don’t go up on the roof to smoke at night... Don’t go on the roof at night...*” And with that, Arthur Rose then sits up, and she says:

“Who live in this cider house? Who grindin’ those apples, pressing that cider, cleaning up all this mess? Who just plain live here, breathin’ in that vinegar? Well, someone who don’t live here made those rules...”

Now, I don’t know whether or not you can relate to that story or to those statements. But Joseph does! Joseph falls asleep, tossing and turning. And why? Because of the rumor-mill morality. Because of the rules that have been set down in the Book of Deuteronomy [22:23—27], which say that Mary—because of her pregnancy—ought to be stoned to death. Joseph doesn’t want to see that happen; and so because he’s a simple man and a moral man, he’s going to do the right thing; he’s going to divorce her quietly. It’s not his problem. And this is the only choice that makes righteous sense. And yet, stop RIGHT there. STOP TRYING TO BE SO RIGHT. Do you remember what the Gospel of Matthew, chapter one, verse eighteen, states quite clearly?

***“Now, the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...”***

- It took place without the fanfare and the well-wishes of friends and family.
- It took place amid relationships that seemed messy and immoral.
- It took place as the rumor mills and the idol factories were just about to produce a heavy dose of shame.
- It took place with a teenage mother who had given her consent, but who was probably ill-equipped for all the trauma and travel to come.
- It took place with an exhausted and disappointed fiancée who was doing his best to maintain his own dignity (while also caring for Mary’s safety) by making a logical decision.

***“But just when [Joseph] had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit...’”***

I mentioned earlier how the genealogy of the Messiah which precedes this dream is already convoluted and tainted. It's tainted with at least one prostitute [Rahab] and one adulterous affair [the wife of Uriah, who is Bathsheba]. And, you see, that makes me curious about us. Are we ready to believe that God can use this stuff? When Christ is born in us, do we have to banish all the family skeletons to the closet? When Christ comes down the birth canal of our days and nights, do we have sweep all the dirty, little secrets under the rug? For the head of Christ to crown, do we have to sterilize everything that we've ever done—and everything that's been done to us? The answer, thank God, is ABSOLUTELY NOT. For the gospel to be gospel—for the good news to actually be good news—we have to get over the classic Santa Claus dichotomy of separating the Naughty from the Nice. In fact, biblically-speaking the Naughty are more inclined to receive the Coming of Christ before anyone who feigns being Nice. And I want to be really clear when I say this: THE DREAM-INFORMED DECISION OF JOSEPH TO REVERSE HIMSELF AND TO NOT DIVORCE MARY is an indication that you and I do not have to look good WHILE IN THE PROCESS OF BEING MADE GOOD.

But, you see, the pressure's on. Benjamin Franklin, in 1790, wrote the President of Yale College: "As to Jesus of Nazareth... I think the system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, to be the best the world has ever seen, or is likely to see." And so, unfortunately, even today, we assume this to be our purpose. And the pressure's on. In the United States of America, where a large percentage of men, women and children will go to sleep on Christmas Eve, a moral majority of them will be celebrating the Goodness of their own families in the morning. Or they'll be celebrating how much they appear Good in polite society... The pressure is on!

- The purpose of Northwood Presbyterian Church is to promote good moral behavior so that our families may be look good on their flattering Christmas cards.

Tell that to Joseph. It's time to dream.

- The purpose of Northwood Presbyterian Church is to separate itself, to keep its distance, from all the shady characters and sinful behaviors of the world.

Tell that to Joseph. It's time to dream.

- The purpose of Northwood Presbyterian Church is to attract families who, by all appearances, can sleep well at night.

Tell that to Joseph, the husband of Mary, the adopted father of Jesus. It's time to dream.