

“Dreaming”
Rev. Lynne Keel
December 29, 2019

True confessions: how many of you have packed away all the Christmas decorations? I tend to pack it all away as fast as I can, because after Christmas morning, it feels a little depressing. By now, we’ve unboxed the gifts and we might have even finished with our exchanges/returns. We tend to think the big celebration is over when the final gift is unwrapped on December 25th. But just as our culture’s version of Christmas is winding down, the church’s understanding of Christmas is just starting to unfold. We are still celebrating Christmas, because now we are beginning to learn why our Almighty God walking in the flesh here on earth actually matters.

This morning’s text picks up the Christmas narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, and I think it’s interesting to note that the entire story as told in Matthew is predicated on dreams. We read that after Mary conceived the Son of God in her womb, Joseph planned to break things off with her, but it was in a **dream** that he discovered a different yet divine plan. Following the birth of Jesus, the wise men were on a mission to pay homage to this king of the Jews on Herod’s command, but it was in a **dream** that they learned to go home by another way. And so now we learn of other critical dreams of an exhausted new father that follows in Matthew 2:13-23. Listen now to the word of the Lord...

¹³Now after [the wise men] had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

¹⁶When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸“A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called



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Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

So, what these scriptures refer to as dreams, I think most of us would characterize as nightmares. When we think of Jesus' birth, if we are being honest, we prefer the account in the gospel of Luke. That's the version we always read at Christmas Eve services. Those scriptures most readily fit into our Christmas carols and cards. They strike the proper holiday mood. They are a little more polite and serene which fit our cultural celebrations of Christmas; those sentimental images of a contented little baby with his parents, angels, shepherds and cute fuzzy animals - the stuff that all great Christmas pageants are made of. But merely four days out from Christmas day, this morning's text turns the Christmas story into a nightmare. It jolts us from the idyllic and sanitized images of the nativity to the cold, hard reality into which Jesus came into the world.

From the very beginning, Jesus and his family became refugees. No sooner were Joseph and Mary finally getting the swing of this parenting gig did they have to flee to Egypt to save their lives. Ironically, this calls to mind the Exodus story and the hundreds of years of oppression suffered by the Israelites at the hand of Pharaoh. Egypt is remembered as a land of bondage for the Jews and likely would not have been on Mary and Joseph's top 10 list of family vacation destinations. And yet, the realities that faced Joseph and this young family were so horrific that they were forced to go.

It is hard for us to understand what it would be like to be a newly formed family and head out into the very dangerous night into a foreign land where we do not know the language, the food, the culture, or the customs. And by the way, nobody wants us there. Worrying about petty things that we tend to think about when traveling abroad, such as the drinking water, would have been the least of their concerns.

Furthermore, they were fleeing the tyranny of a cruel and paranoid dictator. Herod was appointed by the Romans to be the Jewish king, not by the Jews, so therein lie some significant leadership problems. And then, in walk three wise men asking, "Where is the King of the Jews?" Now, I can't claim to be well versed on etiquette when addressing a monarchy, but I'm pretty sure that it was a major faux pas to ask the king where the king is, if you know what I mean.

So we can imagine Herod was already feeling a tad insecure about his authority, and the wise men did not help that cause. Additionally, details of history reveal to us the savage nature of his rule. He killed three of his own sons who he suspected of plotting against him. His own children! It was also thought that he had plotted to kill all of the Jewish nobility at the time of his own death to ensure that the entire kingdom would be mourning. While this particular plan was never carried out, it reveals something of the nature of his paranoia. This guy was pure evil.

But we don't even need those details from history to know of the evil of which Herod was capable. This morning's text has been known throughout church history as the "Slaughter

of the Innocents.” All of the children in Bethlehem within the age range of Jesus were killed because of their age and nothing else. There was no investigation; there was no due process; there was no trial. Fathers went to work and mothers were probably doing their morning chores when the unimaginable took place. Their lives were completely devastated with no explanation. That doesn’t seem to make it into Christmas cards, does it? So this homeless, refugee family continued on their journey. Finally, Herod had died and according to another dream, it was supposedly safe to go home. But in fact, Herod’s son, Archelaus was a chip off the old block and apparently even more cruel than his father. So after additional harrowing moves, this holy family finally settled in Galilee in a small town called Nazareth. We’d like to think that the rest of this story plays out like a Disney movie, that everybody is safe now, that the violence is over, but we know the truth. It has only just begun.

Recently, a church in southern California erected a nativity scene on their property, but it was very different than the typical images that are portrayed in artwork, cards, and in most churches. On the lawn of Claremont United Methodist church, a mylar blanket replaced swaddling clothes around the baby Jesus who was contained within a cage. He was separated from Mary and Joseph who looked on from their own individual cages draped with barbed wire. The pastor of the church, Rev. Karen Clark Ristine, wrote this on her Facebook page, “In a time in our country when refugee families seek asylum at our borders and are unwillingly separated from one another, we consider the most well-known refugee family in the world.”¹

The display and her social media post were referencing the controversy facing our country surrounding immigration policies as well as the detention and prosecution of asylum seekers. To date, there are more than 5,400 migrant children in government custody, separated from their parents. Rev. Ristine referenced this morning’s biblical text and stated that Mary and Joseph “feared persecution and death. What if this family sought refuge in our country today?” As you might well imagine, the Facebook post generated over 10,000 comments, lots of debate, and widespread media coverage. Many were offended by the violent, stark depiction of the story of Jesus’ birth as well as the political implications of considering the lives of refugees through the eyes of God.

My intent of sharing this story is not specifically to debate immigration policies today, although it is my great hope that our theology will guide and convict us as citizens of this country. But I do believe this depiction of the nativity rightfully challenges our assumptions of the peaceful, docile Christmas picture that we like to paint.

What does it mean, for instance, that our Savior’s mother was a pregnant unwed teenager, initially a scandalous single mother? What does it mean that Jesus was born and raised dirt poor? What does it mean that he was a refugee, fleeing authoritarian rule in a violent, hostile world? What does it mean that he was homeless? What does it mean that he was an immigrant living in a foreign land where he and his kind were absolutely not welcomed? What does it mean that Jesus died by capital punishment as a convicted criminal? If God

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/us/nativity-scene-cages-claremont.html>

came to live with us to connect with the human experience, what does it mean that he came in the form of and lived in the circumstances of the most marginalized and the oppressed of our society?

As a Christian church, these are the sorts of implications that Christmas really has on our lives and our world. This account of the life of Jesus in Matthew reveals a harsh, politicized environment, and it is the exact environment in which God chose to dwell. If we claim to be disciples of Christ, we can't ignore that. When God decided to walk among us, God came as an outsider in the messiness and filthiness of the world. Jesus fully understood the plight of those less fortunate, because he lived it day by day, hour by hour, until his final breath, buried in an unmarked tomb, intended to be forgotten! Will a day ever come when we start incorporating this part of the story in our Christmas celebrations?

But many of us still cling to the cute little 8lb 6oz baby Jesus, "No crying he makes." If you take that line of thinking to its logical conclusion, this kind of Jesus is a passive Jesus, one who is disconnected with the pain and hardships of this world. If God came to be one of us, personally, I need God to walk in the shoes of reality. I don't want God to live in some sheltered palace, eating the best foods and living a charmed existence. Doesn't our world already have enough of those leaders, and aren't they failing humanity spectacularly? How else can God save the entire human race if God hasn't experienced our greatest trials, challenges and losses?

To be fair, very few of us know what it is like to be raised by scandalized parents, to be poor, to be homeless, to live as unwanted immigrants. But our world is not lacking for those experiences. We don't have to look very far to be confronted by violence, poverty, homelessness, and immigration and come face to face with Jesus. It is right here in our own community and in the next country and around the world. Jesus said it himself later in Matthew 25:40 - "Whatever you have done for the least of these, you have done for me."

Friends, this morning's graphic and painful scripture invites us to view those experiences through the eyes of Jesus. Throughout history, our gaze has always been fixed on the rich and powerful, and quite frankly, many of our Christmas celebrations reflect those particular values. But Christ's humble birth into a violent and hateful world draws our gaze elsewhere to what really matters: God's deep and abiding love for every kind of human being. It's the kind of love that transcends politics, nationalism, patriotism, racism, classism, sexism and every other form of discrimination that humanity has created. It's the greatest gift that this world has ever known or will ever know. It's the kingdom of God here on earth. Can we dare to dream those kinds of dreams?

We are just a few short days away from a new calendar year and a new decade. But this year, I encourage you to take a walk in Jesus' sandals to walk alongside the very people with whom God most associated. Make a New Year's resolution to allow a different view of the nativity to both scandalize you and draw your attention to Jesus' people - the misfits, the disenfranchised. Just as God spoke to Joseph in dreams, let us make space this year for God to plant new visions in our dreams. Amen.