

Second Sunday After Christmas

Year A, RCL

January 5, 2020

North Fork Ministries

Gospel:

Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Now 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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and 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."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But 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. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

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 For years I would awaken my daughter in the morning with a question. What are you dreaming, honey? And before she had time to fully awaken, almost as if she were still in the midst of the dream, she would begin to walk me through it. Sometimes, in great detail, I would learn of the deep dark forest she was visiting with long curled monkey's tails, draping over tree branches from high overhead. Or of her classroom where water had dripped through the ceiling with such force that the students' books and papers were soon floating all about, and the children scrambled to safety atop their desks. And then we would talk about what such dreams might mean and what they might be telling her about herself or whatever looming crisis might await a 10-year-old girl.

Joseph, like his Old Testament namesake (the Joseph with the coat of many colors) clearly paid attention to dreams himself. On the Sunday before Christmas we read how he was told by an angel of the Lord, in a dream, to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, "for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit". Then, after Jesus' birth, Joseph was warned in another dream not to pass through the land ruled by Herod, but to return home by another road. Then, in a third dream, he is told to, ""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."

Eventually, Herod the Great died, and once again, a fourth time, an angel appears in a dream to Joseph, saying, "Get up, (With all this dreaming I don't

know how Joseph ever got good night's sleep) 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." But Joseph learned that Archelaus was ruling over Judea, and Archelaus was so cruel, that even the very brutal Romans had him removed from office. So Joseph was reluctant to take his wife and child there. Finally, Joseph is warned in a fifth dream to go to Galilee, and so the family settled there, in the place we now know as Jesus' hometown – Nazareth.

This is the story of Jesus the refugee – a child taken by his parents from one country to another, seeking safety, following dreams and of parents propelled by fear and longing, pursuing a vision of a better, safer life for their offspring.

I wonder what the child Jesus thought of this wandering about and how it might have formed him. As we later learn about the youngster Jesus in the Temple, he displayed remarkable insight for his age. It was perhaps his wandering, uncertain childhood that inspired him to later tell his disciples, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

As your priest, I am often offered insight into the deeply personal nature of your lives. You often share your dreams with me and your deepest fears. What I've realized over the years, from my own experience, and having received the collective wisdom of your experience, is that the dreams we follow and the dreams we fear, seldom come to pass as we imagine them. It's not that dreams aren't ever realized. Often they are. We live in a prosperous nation, with opportunity, and the prospect of a better future is attainable. But it seldom works out as we planned. The unemployed get jobs, often better more fulfilling jobs. And the bright shiny future that couples imagine on their wedding days, rarely play out for them exactly as they had hoped. But at the same time, our darkest fears rarely come to pass either. It seems that it is the fearsome nature of our anxiety over what the future holds, that causes us the greatest grief.

I want to read you a poem written by Jane Kenyon, called "It Might Have Been Otherwise".

*I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.*

*At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.*

I believe we are protected in uncertain times and, like the Christ child, hidden in secret places. And I have great faith in God's providence. But I find myself skeptical when I hear people, well meaning people, say that "God has a plan." As I read this story of Joseph and his five dreams, and imagine him zigzagging across the Middle East, the young child Jesus and his weary wife Mary in tow - jumping up and moving in response to the urgings of the Lord's angel, I can't help but wonder about the decisive nature of God's plan. What would have happened if Joseph hadn't heeded the angel's advice to avoid Herod's savagery, and hadn't chosen to "go home by another way." If Joseph hadn't followed his dream would we still celebrate the birth of the Christ child? It might have been otherwise.

As one whose course of life has also taken a rather zigzagging path, replete with fits and starts, and one who hasn't been reluctant to follow dreams - foolish and otherwise, it's hard for me to imagine that God had a carefully crafted plan in mind. What does seem clear, however, is that through the missteps, through the dreaming, through the journeys from one land to another, I have been formed, and prepared for the work that we are doing here. And I suspect that each of you, have been prepared in unique ways, in your own way, to share in this church revitalization project. But it might have been otherwise.

We might have chosen paths that would have never brought us together. But we did. Through whatever strange confluence of choices, events, happenstance, fate, denial or following of dreams, we have arrived here, at the beginning of the year of our Lord, 2020. My prayer is that we will pay close attention to our dreams - that when the angel of the Lord, tells us to "Get up", that we will arise and follow our path. But more than that, my prayer is that along the way we will taste the morning's sweet milk and flawless peach, do work we love, share dinner by candlelight, and walk the dog in the birch wood. And do all that we do with the joy and recognition that it might have been otherwise.

