

*The Time is Near*

Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

When my youngest brother began playing Little League ball, my mom was not able to take him to the initial meeting and asked that I take him. After eating hot dogs and hamburgers all the boys were asked to sit on the floor in the front of the picnic shelter as the coach began to talk with them. His first question, "How many of you have dreams of playing in the major leagues in the future?" Looking around, the hand of every little boy was raised in hope and anticipation of the future. The coach replied, "The answer to that dream begins now." Dreams are important.

A couple of days ago I awoke from a dream that left me frightened and concerned about what day and time it was. I ran to the kitchen to look at the clock, discovering it to be 3:15 AM! I then grabbed my cell phone from the desk to check the day...Wednesday. It was only then that relief flooded me from head to toe. I had dreamed that it was Sunday morning and I had slept through church! Dreams are important and can be a bit unsettling.

Dreams are important. Biblical dreams are plentiful and often reveal the future. They can also be a bit unsettling. Today's gospel lesson is about a dream. The Fourth Sunday of Advent is about Joseph's dream. The Gospel of Luke tells us of Mary. The Gospel according to Matthew gives us Joseph's perspective.

Today I invite you to consider Joseph's point of view. According to Jewish tradition, years prior an arrangement had insured that the young girl MARY would become Joseph's wife at the appropriate time. Joseph had looked forward to beginning his life with Mary, and beginning their own family. Joseph had dreams of what their future might hold as they began their life together, and those dreams probably did not include a romanticized image of life but were realistic in their expectations of the life of a Jewish carpenter family.

However, life did not proceed as Joseph expected. Mary was "with child" and it was not Joseph's! What was he to do? Reveal her secret and she would be stoned to death. Walk away and leave her to a fate worse than death? The scripture tells us that "Joseph was a righteous man." And the scripture lets us know that this is the child of the Holy Spirit, but such things are unheard of. To Joseph this pregnancy is a violation of social convention and ethics for an unmarried woman.

Things were not going as he planned! Divorce seemed the only logical answer to his dilemma.

And then he had a dream!

Joseph just wanted to handle this quietly and go about his business, making no trouble and drawing no attention. However, in the dream Joseph is directed to violate convention. He violated convention - not to be politically rebellious, or even to know his own goodness. Joseph violated convention and remained faithful to Mary because God, as God often does, intervened in an unexpected way. God sent an angel to appear to Joseph in a dream. The angel said, "I know this is not what you expected, Joseph, but it is going to be OK. God is about to do something wonderful, despite the fact that according to Jewish custom and law you are in a rather socially unacceptable situation.

Yes, Mary was his wife, and surely Joseph must have cared for Mary. But, still, this took a lot of trust! And this is why Joseph's dream is so important. Joseph had to trust Mary, but Joseph also had to trust God and God's messenger.

Each of us is a bit like Joseph. We would much rather go along, quietly doing what is right, calling no attention to ourselves or our lives, but then, life steps in and things no longer go smoothly, nothing goes as we had planned. God sends a visitor in the night. We have a strange dream, or a child comes into our lives when we least expect it, like nothing we could have imagined and our lives are forever changed.

Dreams are important: Dreams of the future, dreams with messengers, dreams that require us to trust, dreams that guide us in very peculiar ways.

Dreams can bring together strange groups of people to do unimaginable things. After all, the group gathered at the manger on that first Christmas, are not each other's friends and neighbors, and there was no blood relations among them at all. Mary and Joseph, barely married; the shepherd cowboys, who've never heard of these two before; three foreign dignitaries, not Jewish, not local, and not to be seen ever again; a strange assortment indeed. It was a group that only God could assemble to accomplish a most amazing result.

Folks, we have no idea what the future holds for us, for First Presbyterian Church. Let us not forget that neither Mary nor Joseph could've anticipated the fullness of their child's life, much less its enduring power in our own lives. For you see, God comes through ordinary, mixed-up people in order to save ordinary, mixed-up people, and that God comes through a birth like all the millions of other births in the world to promise us freedom from sin, fear, and death and rebirth as the children of God, even rebirth as a church.

A little over a year ago I asked you, the members of this congregation, what you wanted for the future of this church and unanimously you voted to "do whatever it takes" for renewal. And we have begun some significant work to turn things around, with God's guidance.

However, last week I heard that some folks were anticipating the eventual closure of this church and because of that, questioned decisions to update or remodel, spend money that has been provided despite our own failure to understand. Almost simultaneously I experienced a neighborhood child who did not know the story of Jesus' birth but was intrigued to learn the Christmas story and the reason for God coming to be with us in the form of this infant child.

As I prayed for God to help me know what to do, the voice was certain, "First Presbyterian Church has a mission as long as there are children in this area who do not know the story of Jesus' birth."

On Tuesday evening when the Session met, I shared this with them and am now sharing this with you: God has a plan for the future of this church. Of this I am certain. It may not be the future you envision. Like Joseph, you may prefer that it be nice, neat, quiet, and require little of you. However, that is not how God works. Not then and not now.

First Presbyterian Church has a future because God says so. It is not up to you or to me. God is leading us to do a new thing in this place. We don't know what this new thing looks like, but we must trust God and God's messengers as well as each other as we stand together to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel Message to all who will hear it. We have a story to tell that can and does save lives; that can and does offer hope, that can and does bring light into the darkness of this world.

As we tell this story we must be steadfastly positive that God is in control and everything will be OK. We know not how. We know not what, but we must trust God as we move forward to do Gods will and that does not include closing.

Like Joseph, sometimes, we are supposed to trust God and then get out of the way. Trust that God is working through our life, our friends, the strangers that wind up coming to the manger with us, and then get out of the way. Trust that God is working in our children, and then get out of the way.

I was asked a recurring question this past week. I am asked something like this all the time: Why doesn't God speak to us directly? Wouldn't it be great if an angel appeared again? Like the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary?

Well, my answer is this: God does appear to us, just like Gabriel appeared to Mary and just like the angel appeared to Joseph. Are you looking? Are you listening? Are you paying attention?

The time is at hand. God is in this place, Immanuel, God is with us. Amen.