

Dreams of Home, Dreams of Hope
Matthew 2:1-23; Isaiah 63:7-9
First Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 63:7-9

⁷I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. ⁸For he said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely”; and he became their savior ⁹in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Matthew 2:1-23

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.””

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

¹³Now after they 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.”

A Prayer for the Children of the World

O God, for the gift to humankind that is the sight of a child
who is happy, growing, learning, thinking,
eating good food, playing with someone else,
luxuriating in the comforting and protective love of a parent,
we give you thanks and praise.

We acknowledge your insistent call on us when we see a child for whom
any of that is denied.

Great and gracious God, there are too many tears; there is too much
cruelty and apathy; and Herod seems still at work in this world.

We lift up to you our heartbreak when the fragility of children’s lives is
violated.

Show us, O God, we pray, what we need to do in the face of exploitation
of the most helpless in our world, in the presence of violence committed
against those least able to defend themselves or understand why, in the
presence of socio-economic policies and so-called geopolitical
“realities” that cause poverty and dislocation and war and famine to stalk
the earth.

Into this perilous world of vulnerability, you, O God, chose to enter as
an infant, who, though sung and watched over by armies of angels was

still entirely dependent upon whatever love, goodness, and safety could be provided by young, inexperienced parents.

You sent your Son, knowing that you, the all-powerful Creator God of the universe, would suffer for your own infinitely profound love.

We know that you hold sacred in your divine heart our tears and our gratitude for our own children and the children of the world—and are they not all, every one of them, our children?—

to protect and nurture,
 to love without judgement,
 to provide for and advocate for,
 to educate with unbounded knowledge
 and to enlighten with the example of holiness
 and compassion and awe,
 and to protect from the Herods of this world?

Give us strength to protect those who are always the most vulnerable, always the most innocent.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Matthew 2:19-23

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

The Sermon

Sometimes Christmas comes off just right: the services worked for you; you stayed more or less within budget; Christmas Day seemed just right from start to finish and you felt somehow a little bit closer to Jesus than you do on most other days.

Sometimes Christmas Day, for any reason or for no particular reason, doesn't pan out: there's nobody to share it with; or no two people are feeling the spirit at the same time; or the weather's all wrong or you got some bad news or you got into an argument or it just doesn't pan out the way you always want it to, and you don't feel any better or stronger in your relationship with God than on any other day.

Like anything that involves weeks of anticipation along with a general assumption that it's supposed to feel special, Christmas can be tricky that way.

First of all: if you've had a perfect Christmas this year, or just one where something went exactly as you needed it to, fantastic. That is a blessing.

But it's also entirely OK *not* to have had a spectacularly cozy Christmas Day. If you didn't happen to get that feeling, it doesn't mean you failed, or that anybody else failed you.

The Bible doesn't spend much time dwelling on what anything “feels like.”

It's not very interested in that phenomenon that the Danes call *hygge*, where cold and darkness are a context for the almost spiritual depth of things like the coziness of the fireplace, or candlelight, or the warmth of home at that mystical point on a wintry late afternoon when the grey-white of the day turns to deepening shades of blue.

Matthew doesn't have a lot of time for *hygge*.

He starts his gospel with about as much emotion as a data processor, rattling off a list of 42 people who were begat by someone before them. But even when that thrill-ride of a passage is over with, and Matthew shifts into narrative story-telling, he still doesn't seem very interested in the parts that ought to be most astonishing.

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

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.”

Did you catch that sentence in the middle of that? Matthew has just made a universe-shattering statement: “She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” But like so many other moments in the Old and New Testaments, the writer doesn't even bat an eyelash, let alone pause to marvel at the stunning, literally almost-incredible magnificence of what has just been said.

The story just goes on—and there's a lot to say.

First, as soon as Joseph had made his decision, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said, “Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

So Joseph married Mary, and Jesus was born.

The Magi brought gifts to the little boy Jesus. And just before they headed back to Herod, they were warned in a dream not to do that, so they left by another way.

Then Joseph had another dream, in which an angel—the Greek word for angel is “aggelos” and it means “messenger”—a messenger came to him in a dream and told him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt, and stay there until the same angel came to him again to tell him it was safe.

So they went to Egypt, and stayed there until Herod had died.

Joseph knew that Herod had died because he had a dream, in which an angel said: “Go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”

And Mary and Joseph took their son and headed for Israel.

But before getting there, Joseph heard that Herod’s son had taken over from his father, and guess what: he had a dream, in which he was warned to go to Galilee instead.

So they did, and Mary and Joseph and Jesus settled in a nowhere town in Galilee called Nazareth.

Usually when we talk about following your dreams, we’re talking about hopes and aspirations and doing things that will lead to magnified levels of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Joseph’s dreams, and the dreams of the Magi, didn’t talk about “being your best self now” or achieving greater financial freedom.

They were dead serious, practical, and all about survival. And in Joseph's case, they were about making sure that he and Mary would be in a position to bring into the world their uniquely divine child.

They're paying attention to their dreams. And God is inviting them to bring the delicate, vulnerable good news safely into this broken world, where it is so desperately needed, in a way that only they can do.

Is it possible that God is also inviting you to do the same thing—to bring the ever-so-delicate, vulnerable good news safely into this broken world, where it is so desperately needed, in a way that only you can do?

The story of Joseph and Mary and their baby is not all *hygge* and Christmastime sentimentality. Everything in the world Jesus came to save was not “peace on earth, goodwill to all.”

But they heard a message and Matthew wants to share it with you. Specifically: Pay attention to what God is telling you.

Sometimes our dreams are wonderful and warm, and sometimes they are a warning that if you're going to bring Jesus into the world, you're going to have to go another way from what you had expected.

In either case and all cases, God is reaching out from the infinity of the cosmos into your sphere, into your life, into your dreams.

What do you think God has been saying to you in the year that is just ending? And what is God saying to you now?

Today is only the Fifth Day of Christmas. We're not even halfway through the season.

And I know, the candles have burned and the presents have been opened and the meals have been eaten and the weight loss plans are being enacted and all of that. I understand.

But I've always wanted to be Ebenezer Scrooge—not before Christmas Eve, but after: living generously, spreading good news and good cheer, acknowledging how gracious God is to allow me another chance to do and be better than I was before.

I probably stink at that from February through late November. But the earth keeps going half a billion miles around the sun, and I keep getting chances to do it better this time, and with God's help, we are always learning more and more about how we can get there.

And, maybe, if *I* can learn to be the Christmas version of what God created me to be on all 12 days instead of just the one, maybe we can learn to be Christmas people for all 365 instead of just the 12.

When Fyodor Dostoevsky was in his late 20s, he and some other Russian writers were victims of an appalling stunt whereby the tsar supposedly sentenced them to execution for writing subversive materials, but then at the last second it was revealed that he was going to let them all live after all. Instead, they would be sent to do hard labor in Siberia for a few years and then conscripted into the army for a few years after that.

Dostoevsky wrote a letter to his brother that very afternoon, and said:

“Life is everywhere, life is in us ourselves, not outside. There will be people by my side, and to be a human being among people and to remain one forever, no matter in what circumstances, not to grow despondent and not to lose heart—that's what life is all about, that's its task...

“I haven't lost heart, remember that hope has not abandoned me... After all, I was at death's door today, I lived with that thought for three-quarters of an hour, I faced the last moment, and now I'm alive again!

“If anyone remembers me with malice, and if I quarreled with anyone, if I made a bad impression on anyone—tell them to forget about that if you manage to see them. There is no bile or spite in my soul, I would like to so love and embrace at least someone out of the past at this moment.

“When I look back at the past and think how much time was spent in vain... how I failed to value it, how many times I sinned against my heart and spirit—my heart contracts in pain. Life is a gift, life is happiness, each moment could have been an eternity of happiness...

“I swear to you that I won’t lose hope and will preserve my heart and spirit in purity. I’ll be reborn for the better. That’s my entire hope, my entire consolation.”¹

John O’Donohue wrote:

As this year draws to its end,
 We give thanks for the gifts it brought
 And how they became inlaid within
 Where neither time nor tide can touch them.

The days when the veil lifted
 And the soul could see delight;
 When a quiver caressed the heart
 In the sheer exuberance of being here.

Surprises that came awake
 In forgotten corners of old fields
 Where expectation seemed to have quenched.

The slow, brooding times
 When all was awkward
 And the wave in the mind
 Pierced every sore with salt.

The darkened days that stopped
The confidence of the dawn.

Days when beloved faces shone brighter
With light from beyond themselves;
And from the granite of some secret sorrow
A stream of buried tears loosened.

We bless this year for all we learned,
For all we loved and lost
And for the quiet way it brought us
Nearer to our invisible destination.ⁱⁱ

I recount the gracious deeds and praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor that God has shown according to God's mercy, according to the abundance of God's steadfast love.

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ⁱ Story and Dostoevsky quotes provided by Maria Popova, "Dostoyevsky, just after his death sentence was repealed, on the meaning of life" in the weekly email Brain Pickings by Maria Popova (newsletter@brainpickings.org), Dec 22, 2019, 6:06 AM

ⁱⁱ John O'Donohue, "At the End of the Year" in O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 159-160.