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"Silent Partner"

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

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 7:10-16

In this morning's passage from Isaiah he offers the disbelieving King Ahaz of Judah a sign of God's care, but he king piously refuses to ask the Lord for a sign. "Well then," says Isaiah the Lord will give you a sign! The sign that Ahaz received was repeated and fulfilled for all humanity in the birth of the savior of the world. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 7:10-16

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 1:18-25

We've been looking at God's preparing the way for Jesus' advent through his cousin John. Last week we looked at John's wondering if Jesus was the One that was promised to come. This week we look at another man who played a significant role in seeing to it that Jesus was the One who was promised. Will you please stand for the reading of the gospel of our Lord from Matthew 1:18-25

Let us pray. Lord how glad we are that Joseph listened. We are glad that he listened and that he responded to this wondrous news. Help us to listen as we examine his encounter and how he was changed. Change us too, Lord. As we meditate on this phenomenal encounter may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

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A Sunday School class was putting on a Christmas play which included the story of Mary and Joseph coming to the inn. In that class there was one little boy who wanted very much to be Joseph, but when the parts were handed out, his biggest rival was given that part. He was assigned to be the inn keeper instead. He was really bitter about this. So during all the rehearsals he kept plotting in his mind what he might do the night of performance to get even with his rival who was Joseph.

Finally, the night of the performance, Mary and Joseph came walking across the stage. They knocked on the door of the inn, and the inn-keeper opened the door and asked them gruffly what they wanted.

Joseph answered, "We'd like to have a room for the night." Suddenly the inn-keeper threw the door open wide and said, "Great, come on in and I'll give you the best room in the house."

For a few seconds Joseph didn't know what to do. Finally Joseph looked in past the inn-keeper, first to the left and then to the right, and said, "No wife of mine is going to stay in a dump like this. Come on, Mary, let's go to the barn." 1

In most Christmas pageants Joseph is in the background behind Mary and the baby Jesus. All the attention is on Mary while Joseph hangs around with the shepherds and animals off to the side somewhere. Joseph has no lines to speak in the Christmas dramas. He just stands there. In fact, nowhere in any of the gospels is it recorded that Joseph ever says a word. I would be able to play Joseph in a play because he didn't have any lines to remember.

Joseph was called by God to be a behind-the-scenes person in this world historical event. He is not center stage. He is virtually "invisible." He is a mystery, an enigma, a silent partner.

It is obvious that Joseph cared deeply for Mary. He would not have risked his own reputation and protected her if he did not. But his love was deeper and grounded on more than love for his bride to be. For you see he understood that obedience to God, even in the most dire of circumstances, creates a life of substance and character.

Joseph was well within his rights to have put Mary away. When it became evident that Mary was with child he could have easily written her off. Joseph was under enormous pressure. In a culture that valued the sanctity of virginity before marriage, he would immediately come under great suspicion by those around him. Many would think that both he and Mary had broken their premarital vows, it had the dangerous possibility that doing so would have resulted in her being put to death. He was wrestling with what to do when he had a dream. It was through a dream that Joseph discovered that his wife to be was pregnant with a child by the Holy Spirit

Mary was wide awake when Gabriel came to her with the message that she was to be the mother of the Messiah. Hers was a day dream, a wide awake vision of what her role would be in the Messiah's coming.

Joseph was dead asleep when his revelation came. Like men and women of action his mind was so busy thinking through the alternatives that he needed to be unconscious for the angel to get through to him.

Like his namesake in the First Testament, this Joseph had dreams. These dreams were not mere aspirations. They were not dreams of becoming more than a blue collar business owner of a carpentry shop. Joseph's dreams were the way that God got through to him.

In today's culture we think of men of substance as those with the brawn and might, those on the fields or the courts or on the front lines who demonstrate their substance through physical prowess. But here we have Joseph. He's not a member of Herod's imperial guard. He's not a priest; a prince or a magistrate or a gladiator. He's just a small business owner pledging to take care of his family.

Matthew says that after Jesus was born Joseph saw to it that the child had a name. Even though the passage doesn't say Joseph actually said it, Joseph made sure that the name of the baby born in Bethlehem was the name that Gabriel gave him in Joseph's dream--Jesus.

After his first dream about the birth of the child, it says in verse 1:24, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary to be his wife.

Joseph had a second dream. In Matthew 2:13 an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to get up and take the child and escape to Egypt. There was no home town celebration or wedding party for them. They were refugees on the run.

Joseph had a third dream. In Matthew 2:19-22, after being in Egypt some time hiding out from Herod, an angel of the Lord appeared again and told him to take the child back to Israel. Again, he got up and took the child back as he was commanded.

What about you? Are your dreams only earthly aspirations of a better earthly job, or in some cases a job at all or a bigger earthly house or a house at all? Or are your dreams one way that God gets through to you? Do you see yourself as a partner with the Lord? If so, that's wonderful. Fully embrace your partnership with him. If not, I suggest you take a page from Joseph's book. I challenge you to listen to what God is saying to you whether it's in your dreams or when you're wide awake.

We started Advent hearing the voice crying in the wilderness to "Wake Up." Maybe sometimes we need to hear a voice saying, "Dream on."

Susan Andrews is a Presbyterian minister and the 2003 former Moderator of our General Assembly. In fact, she was the first woman pastor to be elected to serve in that capacity. She writes, "Seventy times in scripture, God becomes real and present through dreams - sleep dreams, day dreams, intuitive dreams, vision dreams. Seventy times in the Bible the forgotten language of God bubbles up out of the depth of the human soul. Adam, Noah, Moses, Jacob, Joseph, Isaiah, David, Daniel, Elizabeth, Joseph, Paul, Ananias, John - these earthy, needy, confused people become the mouthpieces of God. How? By listening to and honoring their dreams. How? They did it by moving beyond the controlled rationality of their minds.

Joseph dreamed. And what he discovered was that Mary's baby was not a disgrace, not an embarrassment, not a problem, but instead the very possibility of hope for himself and for the world. Joseph dreamed, and what he discovered was that he could behave in a new way, that he must behave in a new way - that is if he wanted the God in him, the God in Mary, the God in the world to survive.

Joseph's dream did not give him rational explanations or scientific facts or detailed instructions - the how, what, where, why of Mary's pregnancy. Instead, Joseph's dream gave him inspiration. His dream invited him, practical, solid Joseph, to become a partner with God in mystery (even though to us he seems like a silent partner.) Not understanding, but believing, Joseph woke up. In faith, Joseph responded. With courage, Joseph risked new behavior. And excited by hope, Joseph assisted in giving birth to God - a new God for a very old world. Such is the power of dreams.

Where are your dreams and visions, needs and intuitions this day? Is the unconscious voice of God whispering to you in your heart, in your sleep, in your feelings, in your hunches? What is the restlessness which is stirring you up and echoing in your emptiness and bubbling within your fears and anxieties? What is it that God is trying to say to you in the undiscovered parts of who you are? How is God pushing you to give more life to the world? How can you this day, this year, sink into your dreams, trusting them and following them, so that God can be born in you, so that God can be born through you into this world of woe?

The story of the angels and the shepherds, the star and the wise men, the peasant mother and the stoic father - this ancient tale about a baby finding a home in our world - none of it makes much sense. My friends, Christmas is not about fact or fiction. Christmas is about incarnation. Christmas is God's dream becoming flesh. Christmas is God's invitation to each one of us to experience in our most inner selves the coming together of the human and the divine, to sense the possibilities of our own living, to sense the possibilities of the world's healing. Christmas is our opportunity to believe that beneath the predictable patterns of practical living there is the imagination of God's love - an imagination that can make all things new." 3

Yesterday I witnessed some "silent partners," lovingly distributing food to 30 families so that they can have a great Christmas dinner with their families. Their actions of distributing what many of you provided spoke as loud if not louder than the smiles and loving care with which they greeted those who came.

Tonight I will be going with some "not so silent" partners to sing carols to those who cannot come to us. Through our songs about the savior who was born of Mary and cared for and provided for and taught by Joseph we will be sharing the love of that child who was born, who, through the leadership of Mary and Joseph grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and those he came to save.

Sometimes it's not the amount of things that we do, but that we do something when the moment requires it. Failing to take action at critical times can cost us dearly. Joseph wasn't known for the enormity of his deeds, but the fact that he acted at a critical time made him who he was. In fact, after these critical actions we seldom ever hear about Joseph again, it was his actions that saved humanity

by delivering and caring for and protecting our savior when he was the most vulnerable.

Matthew may not have recorded a single word that Joseph ever utters, but his actions speak for themselves. They speak louder than the words he doesn't speak. Who waited on Mary hand and foot when she was pregnant? Who found the place for them to stay on that cold, dark night? Who stoked the fires? Who brought her food? Who was there at daybreak and midnight? Who delivered and received that baby born to be the savior? Who made a way for it to happen in a barn when there was no room in the inn? Who said, "we'll take the barn?" Joseph.

Let every heart prepare him room. Let your heart prepare him room. May your life be committed to the one who committed his life to you from his coming into the world in a stable to his sacrificing his life through death on a cross, and rising on the third day. Watch your dreams come to pass when you become a partner in ministry with him: whether it's a silent ... or maybe even a not so ... silent partner.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for Joseph and his response to your call on his life. Thank you that you have not stopped calling. Thank you that you have called us and are calling us to be partners in Christ's service.

In Jesus you came to live in our midst, taste our suffering and feel our need. Jesus made known your will, taught your way and called us to follow. As Jesus came to break oppression, let us too work to set captives free. As he takes away transgression, let us strive for equity. As he is Emmanuel, as he is God-with-us, let us go with-him into our world to bring joy and peace and love.

We pray for those who are with us who are in need; in need of comfort, of healing, of companionship. We grieve with those who lives lost in Aleppo, Syria. We pray for an end to this genocide and deliverance for those that can yet be saved. As we experience some rare moments of cold in our world, let us keep in mind those who are snowed in and those who have lost loved ones through terrible storms and accidents.

We pray for those we will visit tonight to share the Love of Jesus and bring his joy. Thank you that through us we can continue to bring joy to the world because our Lord, our Master, our Savior has come. May the whole earth receive her King. May every heart prepare him room so that we, with heaven and nature, may sing.

1 Adapted from a story by John Simmons.

2 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by Brett Blair

3. CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Sermons For Sundays: In Advent, Christmas, Epiphany: The Offense Of Grace, by Susan R. Andrews