

Mirabile Dictu

In scripture, messages from God and dreams tend to go together. Joseph, the son of Isaac, had several remarkable dreams; he was the hero in most of them. His dreams drove his older brothers crazy, and to get even, they sold him to a hairy bunch of Ishmaelites. The Joseph of Genesis was definitely a dreamer. I think it's safe to say, however that this dream of Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth in the Gospel of Matthew, is the most remarkable of all.

I doubt that Joseph is having a good night's sleep the night his dream comes to him. How could he, given the decision he has just made? Mary, Joseph's fiancée, has "**been found to be with child**". Such is the polite phrasing of the New Revised Standard Version. Found by whom and under what circumstances Matthew does not say, but if the gossips in Nazareth are anything like those in Tallahassee, we can be sure that tongues have been wagging all over town.

"Hear about Mary? Word is, there's a bun already in the oven."

"I heard her mother had to take the wedding dress out four inches."

"Humph! Kids today. Don't they have *any* self-control?"

Joseph, Matthew tells us, is a righteous man, an honorable man. He decides to waive his legal rights. He will not have Mary publicly disgraced – even stoned – as the law provides. Instead he resolves to divorce her as quietly as possible.

Quite decent of him, really. Joseph is a stand-up-kind-of-guy. He takes some of Mary's shame upon himself, and intends to bear it with quiet dignity. I once heard a Southern preacher describe Joseph as "the epitome of the Christian gentlemen."

But Joseph's generous plan is trumped by an even more generous plan, announced by an angel: "**Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.**"

“From the Holy Spirit . . . he will save his people from their sins.” That’s a lot for a simple carpenter to take in. I wouldn’t have blamed Joseph if he had dismissed this dream altogether. He could have blamed something he ate, or the stress of making that difficult decision to divorce Mary.

But, Matthew tells us, Joseph accepts the angel’s explanation and obeys the angel’s command. He awakes, calls off his lawyer, puts on his rented tux, grabs his best man and rushes to Mary’s side just in time to say, “I do.”

A just man. A righteous man. An honorable man. A man who holds his head up high and pays no attention to the jokes at his expense.

“Hey, Joseph, I heard you found the back door to Mary’s house!”

“Joseph, you rascal! I thought you were a patient man.”

“Hey Joseph, what’s it like to be on the business end your father-in-law’s shotgun?”

For centuries this story has been the subject of controversy because of its miraculous claims about Mary’s pregnancy. No one ever talks about the miracle of Joseph. **“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took [Mary] as his wife . . .”** If it were not for this miracle of faith and obedience, Mathew’s story would have taken a very different turn.

Joseph is either the most gullible man who ever lived, or he’s our clue to incorporating this story into our own lives. I think we should read this story not so much as a statement of historical fact as an affirmation of faith – faith in the God who, by the Holy Spirit, has come into the world as Jesus, son of Mary -- adopted son of Joseph. We should read this a miracle story, to be sure, but perhaps the miracle is not to be found where we expect.

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

I strongly suspect that Matthew knew perfectly well that the Hebrew word used in this quotation from the prophet Isaiah means “young woman.” He knew as well that there was nothing in the Jewish tradition to suggest that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. Tales about virgin births came from pagan sources, not Jewish ones.

Matthew takes a terrible risk by linking Isaiah's words with Mary's condition and Joseph's dream.

But Matthew is plowing new ground. He's writing a Gospel. For Matthew and his church, the life, death, and especially the resurrection of Jesus put everything into a new context. The ancient words of Isaiah resound with new meaning. Old words become fresh proclamation.

Joseph's dream tells us that God comes to us by God's initiative, not ours. "**... the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.**" Jesus of Nazareth, the child of Mary, is more than a prophet, more than a teacher, more than a good man. Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God-With-Us -- fully God and fully human -- not because the church says so, not because we human beings expect him, not even because we're glad to have him. Jesus is God-With-Us because that's how God has chosen to come.

This child, says the angel "**is conceived by the Holy Spirit.**" This is not Joseph's doing. The life within Mary's womb is the work of the Triune God.

Here's the central miracle in this story: *Jesus is Emmanuel*. Mary's virginity is hardly the point. I am a Christian, and a fairly orthodox one at that, but I not have to believe in the virgin birth in order to claim the truth of this story. My faith is not in the virgin birth. My faith is in God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who chose to come to us as Jesus, son of Mary.

Faith in this Triune God comes as a gift – a saving gift. Such faith is not something to achieve but something to receive with thanksgiving.

The miracle in this story is the miracle of God's incarnation. Compared with *that*, the miracle of the virgin birth is a mere footnote. Besides, miracles begin *here* (in the heart) not up *here* (in the head).

Back in eighteenth-century England, a coal miner was converted to the Christian faith during a Wesleyan revival. His hard-drinking colleagues scoffed at his new-found faith. "You don't really believe that Jesus changed water into wine," they chortled.

The miner replied, "I do not know if Jesus really changed water into wine; but I know this: In my house he changed beer into furniture."

Ask Joseph. He can tell you that miracles start at home. The miracle of a life changed, the miracle of love discovered, the miracle of doors opened. One miracle leads to another.

In a culture so famously dominated by males, Joseph lays aside his manly pride and risks the ridicule of his community in order to show mercy to this young woman named Mary. I think that, having already swallowed his pride, it is easier now for Joseph to swallow the angel's story and to open his life to new possibilities as Mary's husband. Before the angel appears to him, Joseph is already on the road to a new kind of righteousness. Who can say where one miracle ends and the other starts?

Here's another example: My wife loves me. Now *that's* a miracle. Ask her! She'll agree. Not only that, the gospel says that God loves me, too. Who would have thought it? I'm not sure myself where one miracle ends and the other begins.

But there are others. To be part of a church where the love of God takes flesh in simple acts of caring – to me that's a kind of miracle in this age of cynicism and self-interest. To come here week after week and be assured that my sins are forgiven – that's a miracle. To be embraced by love made flesh in ordinary people – that, my friends, paves the way for the miracle of God's love made flesh in Jesus, son of Mary.

Joseph is no fool. He knows how the world works, how babies are made, how women are discarded on the trash heap. His resolve to divorce Mary quietly shows that he is not comfortable with the way the world works.

But this angel tells him that he doesn't know the half of it. God's mercy is wider and greater and deeper than anything Joseph has ever dreamed of. God's resolve to change the way the world works has been planted in the womb of Mary, Joseph's betrothed.

God is doing in Jesus something God has never done before. God is coming as Emmanuel, God-With-Us in the living flesh of Mary's boy. This is Joseph's dream. He awakes from his dream and lives his life as though his dream were true.

Awake today with Joseph! Enter into his miracle. Live as though his dream were true, because it is.