

Sermon for Sunday, December 22, 2019 - "Wake Up and Dream"

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Advent is a wake-up call, one we've been hearing all month. Yet Advent is also an invitation to dream along with Joseph and the prophet Isaiah, along with God.

Joseph's story is full of dreams. It starts with a young couple who have hopes and dreams about their future. They'll have a wedding feast and then live together. Joseph will be a carpenter, they'll have children. They'll be respected members of their community because they are righteous and faithful people.

All of a sudden, everything changes.

Mary is pregnant. Joseph is not the father. And Mary is saying the child is of the Holy Spirit. He's got to assume she must be lying or delusional. What a nightmare.

I picture Joseph up all night pacing, stewing, thoughts swirling, unsure how to proceed. Finally, he decides to dismiss Mary quietly and be done with it all.

Just as Joseph resolves to do this, God's messenger appears to him in a dream. He assures Joseph that what is happening for him and Mary is not a nightmare - it is the fulfillment of Israel's hopes and dreams. The angel says, "do not be afraid" to hold on to Mary. She has been faithful. You can be faithful. God will be with you.

This message of promise gives Joseph the courage to take his part in God's dream for the world - God's plan to redeem the whole world. He takes Mary as his wife. She bears a son. Joseph names him, adopting him as his own. Joseph can sleep more easily again. Yet, that's not the end of Joseph's story.

After the child's birth, the whole country faces a horrific nightmare. King Herod is threatened when he learns a child has been born King of the Jews. So, he orders the death of all infants under two years old. God's messenger again appears to Joseph in a dream to tell him his family should flee to Egypt and escape Herod's violence. They stay there until Joseph learns in a dream that they can return home. Still another dream guides him not to go to the area of Judea, but rather to Galilee.

In the midst of confusion, turmoil and violence, God guides Joseph with dreams and helps Joseph to take his part in God's dream for the world.

How does what you dream form and shape your life?

Dr. Craig Nessen, professor at Wartburg Seminary, asked this question in a recent presentation.¹ Nessen points out that what changes us as people are not arguments, but rather what we imagine about ourselves, about others, about the world. *It is our holy work, he says, to imagine the dream of God.*

We've been hearing about the dream of God throughout Advent in the promises from the prophet Isaiah.

God's dream is that swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; that the wolf will lie down with the lamb and no one will hurt or destroy; that the wilderness will burst forth with abundance for all people, all creation; and all will know Emmanuel - God with us.

In Advent, we are called to imagine God's dream, to let it form and shape us as God's people. We're called to open our eyes to how God's dream is already breaking into our reality right now in Christ Jesus who is, who was, and who is to come.

Sometimes when I hear Joseph's story, I long for the clarity he got in his dreams. I long to fall asleep and get messages like he did that will help form and shape me. Some people do get dreams like that. I never have.

Yet, all of us are given Christ Jesus, who is Emmanuel- God with us. Christ Jesus is how God's dream for the world is happening and will happen. Christ Jesus is how God guides us, shapes us, forms us, and how God helps us to take our part in that dream.

Christ Jesus is present today in bread and wine, word and song, in the gathered community. He is here for you today to say what was said to Joseph long ago, "Do not be afraid." Look at what I am doing for you, through you.

Your life and the world might sometimes feel like a nightmare, you may struggle to sleep, you may struggle to get out of bed. But, Christ Jesus here and God's dream is breaking into this world. And, you have a part to play in God's story. This story isn't just about Joseph, Mary, the angel Gabriel and people who get clear guidance in dreams. It is you and me and all of creation.

Let's wake up, open our eyes and dream.

And, let's take a moment to pray.

¹ Dr Nessen asked this question recently during a presentation at the Grace Institute for Spiritual Formation. Learn more about Grace Institute at <https://www.luther.edu/grace-institute/>.