

Dreaming of Change

(Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Second Sunday after Christmas, January 5, 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

In the calendar of the Church, there are seven principal Feast Days that we observe each year: Easter Sunday; the Ascension; Pentecost; Trinity Sunday; All Saints' Day; Christmas Day; and the one coming up tomorrow, Epiphany. Depending on the year, the first four appear on varying dates, while the last three are on fixed dates: November 1; December 25; and January 6.

In a very brief section near the beginning of the *Book of Common Prayer*, guidance is given on transferring – or moving – certain feasts that fall on weekdays to Sunday observances. Epiphany is one such instance in which an observance can be held on the closest Sunday, and there are many churches that take advantage of this option. If you happened to look at the lectionary insert in your bulletins this morning, you likely noticed that there are three different Gospel readings listed – two from Matthew and one from Luke. These choices are offered to give clergy flexibility on what is used depending on what choice they make for the observance.

While a number of churches have made the choice to transfer Epiphany to this morning, I chose not to ... and for a very simple reason: by skipping ahead, even by a day, we miss crucial parts of the story of Jesus. It's like reading a novel; you may want to move from page 100 to page 300 so that you know how the story ends, but by doing that you miss so much that happens in between. Now admittedly it's a bit more convoluted when you look closely at the order for the readings for today and tomorrow; the reading from Matthew that we just heard, for example, occurs *after* the reading assigned for the actual feast day on the sixth. If we skip this morning's reading, however, I feel we deprive ourselves of an important scene that doesn't come up again.

Rest assured we know that the Magi will arrive, and we can certainly anticipate that event. [We even just sang a hymn, "We Three Kings," that is still suitable for today even as it looks ahead to a moment that has not yet taken place, at least according to the liturgical calendar.] But during this time I want to reflect further on a theme on which I preached on the Fourth Sunday of Advent ... the idea that God speaks to us in our dreams.

For those who were here a few weeks ago may recall, Joseph had learned that Mary was pregnant, and in an attempt to preserve her reputation in light of something that in that day would have caused scandal and humiliation he planned to "dismiss her quietly."¹ In the midst of

¹ Matthew 1:19 (NRSV).

the stress and pressure he was feeling to make the matter go away quietly, however ... in the depths of the despair he had to be feeling ... a messenger visited Joseph in a dream and essentially said, “Joseph, don’t panic. It’s okay to take Mary as your wife, because the son to whom she will give birth will do great things ... greater than you can possibly imagine.” Without questioning any of it, Joseph did as he had been asked.

Now, in advance of another stressful event that is looming unseen on the path ahead of him, Joseph receives a second divine visitation as he sleeps. “Joseph, your family is in danger. Herod is out for blood. Get up and go to Egypt, where you will be safe.” This time, there is no greeting of peace ... no calming words of “fear not” that are offered. Instead, it is an imperative ... **Get up and go!** Once again, Joseph does as he is asked; he simply got up and fled with his wife and infant son to Egypt. After a time in exile, still a third heavenly visit ... another messenger appearing on the dreamscape of Joseph’s unconscious mind ... another imperative: **Get up and go!** And for a third time, without question, Joseph does ... this time taking his young family back to what is once again the safety of their home.

In the scriptures, dreams herald change or upcoming action. We’ve already looked at the dreams of Joseph in Matthew’s Gospel. The dreams of Jacob in Genesis were prelude to his return home. The Old Testament Joseph’s dreams were the sign that he would be the greatest among his brothers, and his skill at interpreting dreams guaranteed his success in Egypt. Daniel dreamed of the defeat of earthly empires by a heavenly power. Pilate’s wife had a nightmare that prompted her to warn her husband about the judgment he would soon hand down to Jesus.

Life for all these individuals started moving in one direction, and then they dreamed ... and things were never again the same. We are here at the start of a new year, the 282nd in the history of this parish. Things that were one way in 1738 had changed by 1838, and life here was different in 2000 than in 1900. Changes came because people **hoped** ... **wished** ... **dreamed**. The women and men who came before us were inspired to do more ... either as they were awake or as they slept. There’s no denying that change can be difficult and frightening; I don’t doubt that our predecessors as they dreamed about the future of this parish experienced fear. But as they learned, change also can be rewarding and fruitful.

What are **your** dreams for our future? In this New Year, what is God saying **to you** ... in your **waking** and in your **sleeping**? Where do you **dream** that **we go**? These are important questions to answer and vital conversations to have. Listening to the voices of those who may visit us in our dreams is important. Looking at where we are now and wondering what we can do to **build up** ... to **grow** ... to **shape the future** of Christ Church ... is important.

Pay attention to your dreams. Listen to your dreams. Respond to your dreams. Let your dreams be heralds of the change that lies ahead in our journey.