Joseph Dreams (and the world is turned upside down)

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On December 18th, 2016

**Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25**

I *so* wanted to give you a Christmas present this last Sunday Advent.

I wanted to deliver you the tidy conclusion to our sermon series that began with Zechariah’s prayer; then led to John the Baptist’s Cry; and, last week, continued with Mary’s Song. Now we have Joseph’s Dream, what could be neater … really?

I wanted to give you a present in a neat little box, attractively wrapped, all tied up with a bow on top.

But … I’m sorry … I can’t. That wouldn’t be true to the story of Joseph. Because that story cannot be contained in a box, it isn’t attractively wrapped in shiny paper with a bow on top. In fact it comes with a trigger warning: as I’ve said before, please feel free to step out if some of the material in this sermon is too much for you.

The story starts off well, you see, because Joseph was a righteous man. A good Jew. The image conjures neatness, cleanliness, purity and correctness. He is a guy who “does the right thing” even in difficult circumstances.

As these are certainly difficult circumstances … awkward! The young woman to whom he is betrothed is “found to be with child”, she’s discovered to be pregnant. And Joseph knows it isn’t his.

At the very least, this is a major disappointment. She’s let him down. Perhaps he is deeply hurt by this turn of events. He could easily be forgiven for turning angrily on her and having her exposed to the stoning squad. Mary is fortunate that he is such a decent guy.

He determines to end the engagement and “put her aside quietly.” There is not much explanation beyond this. Will she go away and have the baby in some distant village? Will the infant be adopted by a childless couple? We don’t know, but as far as Joseph is concerned, he has come up with a neat and tidy solution.

But, of course, God does not let it stop here. God has other things in mind. This is not going to be the moment in which Joseph exits the story. Instead God sends an angel – in a dream – to Joseph as he sleeps on his righteous decision.

The angel comes with some astonishing news!

It turns out that God … yes, God, maker of heaven and earth, is acting the midst of this scandal. The angel says that the child conceived in Mary is “from the Holy Spirit.” He gives Joseph the responsibility of naming the child, Jesus, and so adopting him as his own.

The angel adds the news that this child is God’s unique action in history: because he is going to be tasked with saving the people from their sins. Then, as Matthew describes it, the angel selectively quotes Hebrew scripture and departs. Yes, I said selectively.

The words Matthew gives to the angel, from the prophet Isaiah “look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son” are taken from a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. The original Hebrew text actually talks of a young woman, bearing a son. The word for young woman can also be translated as virgin. It is from the prophecy we heard today, and addresses a situation in Israel centuries before the coming of Jesus.

Matthew likes to include these little “proof texts” in his gospel. He likes to make the case that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, no matter how far he has to stretch the scriptures.

This leads us to the messiness of the situation. The child in Mary’s womb is certainly of the Holy Spirit. God is very powerfully involved in this. But Joseph is unlikely to be convinced that this is the immaculate conception that has been promoted for so many centuries. In Joseph’s world, and in ours, babies are made from both sperm and egg. For me, the wonder of conception is a miracle in itself. I have

become convinced that God did not need a special work-around for this particular miracle to take place.

Now, if the immaculate conception is important to you, I don’t want this to shatter your world. This is just one perspective. Our main concern, here, is to get inside Joseph’s head a little. To do that, we may well reflect on what is going through Joseph’s mind when he hears that Mary is pregnant.

At the time of Mary and Joseph, tensions were building between the occupying Roman forces and the Jewish people. These tensions would erupt in full-on war the year 70 CE, with the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. Perhaps you have read the book “The Dove Keepers” by Alice Hoffman, a novel set during this time.

The Romans were not know for their benevolence in the countries they occupied. They demoralized the Jewish population at any opportunity. Their weapon of choice was that of fear. Jesus wasn’t the only crucifixion of the era.

Some ten thousand Jewish men were crucified during the siege of Jerusalem. The crosses were set up circling the temple mound. As James Carroll notes, in his book “Christ Actually”, the fear tactics used on Jewish females remain undocumented. War rape is rarely spoken of,

because of the shame and humiliation on the victims.

Sadly, and to the shame of humanity, sexual abuse as a terror tactic continues to this day. Boko Haram, Abu Ghraib, and the refugee camps of South Sudan come to mind.

I’m sorry. I did warn you, didn’t I, that this wouldn’t be pretty?

But, let’s return to Joseph.

The angel has asked him to demonstrate an amazing act of trust, faith and love. And he follows through. Joseph demonstrates such love for God and for Mary, love for the child, who is of the Holy Spirit after all. It is love that overcomes his feelings of embarrassment, or emasculation. He is ready to adopt the child as his own, and take on all the responsibilities that entails. And in the case of this child, the responsibilities will be many.

The appearance of the angel in the dream, has moved Joseph from the safety of his righteousness. The angel threw out Joseph’s well-thought out plan to “do the right thing”, in favor of something altogether messier and more complicated.

The angel turns Joseph’s world upside down.

I imagine that this is how we recognize the times when the Holy Spirit comes to us. The Spirit breaks us out of our neatly contained world, and calls us to trusting love and obedience we had never summoned before. The Spirit turns our world upside down.

Some years ago, I was doing a great deal of work for my local church. Our Senior Pastor had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and so the church had entered a difficult transitional time. Among other activities, I was writing a weekly email prayer letter, with reflections on the scriptures for each week.

I had also agreed to serve on the search committee for our church to seek out a new Senior Pastor. Anyone who has served on a search committee knows that this work requires a lot of commitment. So I had planned that when the search was over and the new pastor started work, I would cut down on some of my church involvement. That was enough disruption, I was ready to get back to my regular life.

First of all, though, our new pastor had other plans. He invited me to serve as co-moderator, for the first 3 years as he got to know the church. At that moment I realized that I could not cut back, I needed to step up. The church was still recovering from the effects of losing the previous pastor, and needed to consistent leadership. But, of course, that is not the end of the story.

It turned out that serving as co-moderator was simply training for me. I would be called to take on something that would require far more trust, obedience and love that I had ever mustered before.

I would be spending seven years attending seminary. In that time my mind was opened to new, exciting thoughts about the scriptures. I met an incredibly, diverse group of people, each of whom had something to teach me. And I went to places I never expected to go, such as visiting prison, serving in an emergency shelter, visiting a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque. And now I am here. The Spirit had turned my world upside down, back then. But I don’t doubt that she has much more disruption in store for me.

Are you, like Joseph, a good and righteous person? If you are sitting here today, I suspect that you are. But, the question is, has your faith been confined to a box? Have you dared to dream, or do you fear that an angel might arrive with news to turn your world upside down?

Events like an unexpected pregnancy, or a death, or a divorce, can turn our world upside down as it is. Very often, though, the unexpected can come with the invitation to dream. The turn of events can summon from you more love, trust and obedience than you ever thought you had in you.

Have you dared to dream for this church, how God is turning our world upside down with the coming of Jesus? Dare we dream about what God would do if we agreed, like Joseph,to step up and cooperate with the plan.

I have a hint: it will not be to get back to business as usual.

All the same, we trim our trees and clean our homes arranging every ornament just so. We hope that this year we will celebrate the picture perfect Christmas we see on screen, or see in magazines.

We may wish that Jesus would come to us, this year, wrapped up tidily in a box tied with a bow on top. We try to contain God in our Christmas hopes and expectations. I suspect that this is because we secretly hope to limit Christ in order to avoid a disruption our lives.

But, of course, God does not conform to our sense of righteousness and order. God *will* come in the way that God chooses, bursting into our lives when it is the least convenient … calling us to a kind of love we didn’t think we had in us.

We have no choice, because God is God and we are not.We have no choice but to be obedient. No choice but to trust. No choice to love in a way we never thought we could love before.

Do you dare to dream?

Amen