

**1 Christmas
December 29, 2013**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Some of you were here the Sunday that my youngest brother Chad, and his wife Amy, surprised me by showing up at church. They live on the coast of North Carolina and had come down for one of Chad's friend's sixtieth birthday. I was just about to read the Gospel when I looked at the back row and there they were. I literally had to take a second look ... it was so out of place ... and it took my breath away.

Anyhow, after the surprise in church Caren and I took Chad and Amy to lunch. Chad is ten years younger than I am ... the youngest in our family of six surviving children. His passion is woodworking and he received Fine Arts degree from Virginia Commonwealth University and began his career designing and making furniture. Some of his work appeared in fine Woodworking Magazine ... a real kudu. But when the economy took a dip a couple of decades ago he had to get a "Real Job" and took a position with the Hatteras Yacht Company in New Bern, North Carolina. Over the years he advanced at Hatteras and eventually became the one who designed all the custom interiors of their largest boats ... some over 120 feet long.

A few years ago Hatteras Yachts was bought by Brunswick Sporting Goods, and then last year Brunswick was acquired by an international conglomerate. After 21 years with Hatteras Yachts Chad was moved out of his private office into a cubicle and the workload increased. For the past few years Chad seemed to be in a funk ... his spirit had been broken and he was even taking medication for depression. He had an hour commute each way from home to work and we would sometimes talk by phone as he drove home ... he sounded exhausted ... physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Over lunch on that Sunday that they surprised us Chad began telling me about another boat company that had offered him a job. It is a much smaller company than Hatteras but it was just a few miles from his home. He said it was all custom work and much more in line with his "passion." He said, "I could even commute by boat." His wife Amy was talking to Caren but when she overheard Chad she said, "I didn't know you were thinking about taking that job." He looked at her and responded, "I was afraid to tell you." Sometimes our dreams are too vulnerable to share with even those we trust the most.

I heard from Chad on Christmas. His last day at Hatteras was the Friday before Christmas, and he starts his new job tomorrow. He was excited. It wasn't just Christmas spirit I heard in his voice. It was as if something long dead had come alive again. It was as if there were a spark of life where it had been dim before.

Today is the fifth day of our twelve day Christmas Season ... the time between the birth of Jesus and the appearance of the magi on the Feast of the Epiphany. In today's gospel reading from Matthew we hear a continuation of the nativity story. This portion of the story is usually called the "Slaughter of the Innocents" and the name often shapes the way we look at this section of the narrative. However, I think there is a message of divine hope in these words.

After Jesus was born the family was visited by the wise men ... the magi. On their journey to find the baby Jesus they had stopped and asked Herod where they might find the "child who has been born the king of the Jews." Herod found the idea of another "king" very threatening and ordered the magi to return to him with news of this child. But once they had visited the holy family the magi were "warned in a dream" to go home another way. This infuriated Herod who ordered the killing of all the children "around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger." Thus the title "Slaughter of the Innocents." Joseph, who had been visited by an angel in a dream when Mary was found to be pregnant, was again visited in a dream and warned that Herod was after the child Jesus. The angel instructed Joseph to take his family to Egypt.

Now, if you had lived around the time Matthew's gospel was written, and you were Jewish, several things would have occurred to you. First, the mention of an angel appearing to Joseph and the magi "in a dream" would have conjured up thoughts about another Joseph ... Joseph son of Jacob who was son of Isaac who was son of Abraham. Joseph as in Joseph of the coat of many colors ... this is the Joseph who had been sold by his jealous brothers to a caravan going to Egypt. This Joseph interpreted dreams and eventually interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh and rose to power in Pharaoh's court. That is how the Israelites got to Egypt. So the talk of "dreams" would, in a way, set the stage for the rest of the story.

Secondly, the order to kill "all the children around Bethlehem" would have reminded the Jewish listeners of the story of Moses in the bulrushes. Remember, long after the Joseph of old and his family had come to Egypt a new Pharaoh ruled. This Pharaoh was threatened by the increasing numbers of Israelites in Egypt, and ordered the killing of all newborn male Hebrew children. Moses was put into a basket in the bulrushes by his mother to escape the slaughter, and the baby Moses was found by the Pharaoh's daughter. He was then raised in the Pharaoh's court. And, of course, Moses led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Herod's order to kill the children around Bethlehem would have reminded the people of Pharaoh ... and of Moses.

Third, a Jewish person would have noted that this passage was riddled with quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, a Jewish person living in the first century upon hearing the story of Joseph and Mary and Jesus would have immediately thought of the Joseph of old, and of Pharaoh and Moses. To the author of Matthew's gospel Jesus was the new Moses and he began making his point right from the story of the birth of Jesus.

Although Joseph plays a monumental role in this story he does not even have a speaking part. As a matter of fact he doesn't speak anywhere in the New Testament. But I wonder if you can imagine what must have been going on for this man. Joseph would have been a young man

ready to get married and start a family, and then he found out that the family had started without him. He must have felt betrayed, embarrassed, and dejected. As he was trying to figure out what to do he had a dream and an angel told him to go through with the wedding. Should he listen to his emotions ... anger, confusion, feeling betrayed. Or should he listen to his spirit ... a dream that made no sense. We know he listened to the dream ... and his spirit. He stayed with Mary. He would be an earthly father to Jesus.

As if that weren't enough for Joseph, after Jesus is born, some strange foreigners show up at his doorstep to see the baby ... and they brought gifts. After the visitors left Joseph had another dream ... this time an angel telling him to pack up and move to Egypt to escape Herod. Now it was Joseph and his new family who became the strangers in a foreign land as he took them to safety. Finally, Joseph had one last dream telling him it was time to return to his homeland, and he brought Jesus and Mary back to Judea. In this story the bewildered and naïve Joseph is the protector of the vulnerable Mary and the infant Jesus.

So what about your dreams and my dreams? What do your dreams tell you? When have you followed your dreams and/or passions, if ever? Joseph's role in this story is to protect the vulnerable divine child. When your dream begins to become a reality do you have a "Joseph" within you that will protect that new divine spark that is trying to find life? My brother Chad was caught in that very tension ... a new possibility yet he was afraid to share it with his wife Amy because he felt it was so vulnerable. I can imagine the struggle in his mind: What if this idea is just foolishness? What if it was too big a risk? The new job will pay less which will mean I'll have to give up some of my toys. Will I still be happy? What if ...?" What if ...?"

If you want to know the truth, I don't believe this story in Matthew's gospel ever really happened. I don't think there were magi following a star in the heavens. I don't think Herod killed all the children around Bethlehem ... and there is no historical proof of such an event. I don't believe that Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt and back. I don't even think Jesus was born in Bethlehem. I think he was born and raised in Nazareth. But none of that makes much difference to me. This story isn't about biographical fact. It is about the divine being born in humanity. It is about something new and powerful coming into the world and the threat it poses to the status quo and to all those dependent upon everything remaining the same. And it is about that character ... that essence ... that is represented in Joseph that protects that vulnerable spark of divine life.

For me the story of Christmas is not just about Jesus being born 2,000 years ago. It is about divine and sacred life being born in each of us all the time. Usually it threatens us in some way because it means that we will have to change to accommodate it. But if we listen to our dreams, and if we can muster the power of a Joseph within us to protect that vulnerable spark of divine passion, then our lives become more whole ... more full ... more in line with that image of God in which each of us is made.

My brother Chad begins a new life tomorrow. For some, and maybe for him, it can be minimized as just a "new job." But I believe it is the beginning for him of following a path back

to his passion. I believe it is something sacred coming alive in him. I pray that he has a Joseph within him to protect that new life. And I hope and pray that each of you will listen to your dreams and passion, and that there is a Joseph somewhere within your psyche, to help bring that divine spark alive in this world.

Amen.

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