**1 Christmas**

**January 1, 2017**

**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.**

Happy New Year! I hope each and every one of you will know a year full of love, compassion, good health, joy … and many blessings. And my hope and dream is that this is true for the faith community of St. Cyprian’s, for our City of St. Augustine, for this state, the nation and for the world.

Several years my youngest brother Chad and his wife Amy … who live on the coast of North Carolina … came to visit us. 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 accolade. But when the economy took a dip several 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.

About ten years ago Hatteras Yachts was acquired by Brunswick Sporting Goods, and then a few years later Brunswick was purchased 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 several 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 visit several years ago 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 commented then, “This is like a dream … I could even commute to work by boat.”

My sister-in-law 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.

Chad and Amy came to visit again just few weeks ago. Chad is a different person than he was those last few years at Hatteras Yachts. Tomorrow marks the third anniversary of Chad’s employment at Jarret Bay Boat Builders. When Chad spoke about his work it was as if something long dead had come alive again. It was as if there was a spark of life where it had been dim before.

Today is the eighth 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 the 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.

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 is that we hope for … dream for … in 2017? What do your dreams for your own life and being 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 our dream begins to become a reality in this coming year do you have a “Joseph” within us 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 historical fact. It is about the divine being born in humanity. It is about something new and powerful coming into the word 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… at the age of 59 … had a dream and took a risk of listening to his heart to follow where it would lead. For some people … and maybe for even for him … it could have been dismissed as just a “new job.” But I believe it was the beginning for him of following a path back to his passion. I believe it was something sacred coming alive in him. I prayed then that he had a Joseph within him to protect that new life … and it seems that he did. And I hope and pray that each of you will listen to your dreams and your passions … and we as a community of faith will listen to our collective dreams and passions. In our Baptismal Covenant we commit to “striv[ing[ for justice and peace, and respect[ing] the dignity of every human being.” That is our stated passion as Christians, as Episcopalians, as people who worship at St. Cyprian’s Church. And it is my dream that we … as this community of faith will act on that divine spark coming alive in us … even when it means speaking truth to power … in this coming year. Finally, I hope that there is a Joseph somewhere to protect us … individually and collectively … as we bring that divine spark alive in this world.

Amen.