

December 18, 2022. Fourth Sunday of Advent (A)

Pr. Lucy Kolin

Texts: Isaiah 7:10-16, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

I can't count the number of times I've sung "O Little Town of Bethlehem," but every time I sing it, I'm struck anew by the line that describes Bethlehem as a city locked in a "deep and dreamless sleep." In searching for language to describe Bethlehem before the news of Jesus' birth, the hymn writer turned to scripture where an inability to dream translates into an inability to hope and believe that things can be different, that the world will turn, that God's dream for the world will be reality...and that we shall see it and live in it. That is why, throughout scripture, prophets and ordinary folks are always having their "deep and dreamless" sleep interrupted by dreams from God, dreams that reveal God at work in the world, dreams that call God's people to become actors in God's dream and drama of *shalom*.

I don't know whether Mary's Joseph was as full of dreams as his ancestor of the same name, the one whose ability to dream and to interpret dreams brought him release from prison and the opportunity to help his adopted country Egypt survive a deadly famine. But today's gospel tells us that Mary's Joseph was "a righteous man," who even amid his people's "deep and dreamless sleep," was open to God's speaking. With all the usual responsibilities of a man of his time, with all the usual heartaches of living in an occupied zone, with all the special disappointment of Mary's apparent betrayal of their marriage contract, we could understand if Joseph wanted simply to sleep – with no dreams to disturb and no hopes to be dashed upon waking.

But we know, now scientifically but always spiritually, that it is in sleep that we are open and vulnerable to new or different possibilities, which appear to us in dreams. Surely this is one of God's best gifts to us and one that God continues to use to speak to us, to show us things in spiritual high definition that in the daytime, amid unbudging sorrow and continuing trouble, cannot be seen, entertained, or embraced. That's what happened to Joseph...

who, Matthew tells us, was “a righteous man,” but not rigid. He was devoted to the Law, to the way God had spoken to his ancestors, and he looked to God’s word to guide his life. Yet he did not interpret that word harshly. Having learned that Mary was pregnant with somebody else’s child, Joseph did not seek the public and possibly fatal consequences that were his right; instead, he considered how Mary could be spared the worst of public condemnation, how the marriage could be dissolved quietly. Joseph the righteous man was also Joseph the compassionate man. Surely he learned this from God...and maybe also from his ancestor Joseph who, when great power became his in Egypt, refused to exercise his right and punish his brothers who had sold him into slavery. That Joseph, too, had compassion on those who had hurt him and chose to exercise only his right to be kind and forgiving.

But back to today’s gospel: Once Joseph of Bethlehem already had decided to exercise compassion and put aside his dream of marrying Mary, God came to him in a dream...to show him God’s dream, not just for him and Mary, but for all people. God revealed the Spirit at work in Mary’s pregnancy and the holy destiny of her child. And God revealed to Joseph the part he was to play in the dream that God promised would not evaporate with the dawn. Joseph would awake and live in the midst of God’s dream as it became reality, blessed reality, for the world. Though Joseph was clearly not the father of the child Mary bore, he was called to adopt the child, to bring him into the safety of his home, into a loving family and the lineage of David, and to name him Jesus, because he would save his people from their sins.

And, Matthew tells us, when Joseph awoke, he didn’t ask how or why; he simply believed and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded in the dream. Joseph obeyed not because he had to, but because what he was commanded came from a trustworthy authority. He took Mary as his wife; he adopted the child and named him Jesus. By faith, Joseph awoke trusting that God was doing something new, that there was more of the divine story to come, and that he and Mary and the child had their own parts in it. Joseph didn’t know any of the details...the dream wasn’t a memo from heaven spelling out exactly how this child as yet unborn would save his people...only that he would. That is the story we will hear again at Christmas and watch unfolding every Sunday of the next year.

But this is not just a story and a dream for Bethlehem and Joseph. It is a story and a dream for every city and every people...and for us, who ourselves sleep a “deep and dreamless sleep,” who no longer expect or desire dreams...even from God! – because we fear being crushed by disappointment in the morning light. On some streets in our country just as on some streets in lands far away, people are living in an occupied zone, even a war zone, occupied by killing, hatred, and fear. In too many places people are living in deep economic poverty or in the spiritual poverty of hopelessness. Eloquent visions offered by politicians are still only words for too many people, children and adults...the dream is nowhere near reality. And in every household and heart are the secret and personal disappointments and sorrows that come from chronic illness, broken relationships, loneliness, or dreams deferred. So to one degree or another, all of us know what it’s like to settle in to a “deep and dreamless sleep” and believe tomorrow will bring no hope, no positive change.

It was into just such a world that Jesus was born. And, if you follow the story to its historical conclusion, you find that Jesus was sentenced to die because he relentlessly preached the dream and dared to promise its fulfillment, not by the way of vengeance or violence but by the way of accompaniment, by being with us and for us always. That way seemed unlikely but that way which began with God coming to us as a child, vulnerable to the hurt we know, is the way that makes it possible for us to receive him rather than fear him.

The gospel writer makes clear that the powers that be had no place for that way, because they long ago ceased to dream. So the only place they found for Jesus was on a cross and in a tomb, where he would sleep forever, where God’s disturbing dream with its call for conversion and new priorities could be put to rest forever and the world could resume its “deep and dreamless sleep,” undisturbed by holy possibilities. Of course, we believe that Jesus did not sleep forever...we believe God woke him to complete the dream, not just for himself but for the sake of the whole world. God awakened Jesus to new life and so awakened us to new life and to the call to live in the present God’s dream of the future. And through the cross and resurrection, we, like Joseph, dare to say “yes,” dare to obey, not because we have to or because we are afraid not to, but because our God, who is Emmanuel, is trustworthy and true.

Whether this morning finds us waking or sleeping, God is speaking to us again. God is with us and in us, disturbing our sleep with a dream, God's dream with the promise of a new reality of compassion and community – a new family made from the broken pieces of old relationships, a new community working for justice and peace, one body formed from people who before couldn't see themselves ever working together. This is the story of the Church, this is the story of Peace Lutheran, this is the story of people of faith working together here and all across the world. This is the story of the Holy Spirit working faith in us and making it possible for us to believe the dream and embrace our role in bringing it to life... even here, even now. The holy partnership that Joseph and Mary and Jesus embraced is now ours to embrace...changing the landscape of the world from despair to hope.

So don't be afraid to wake or to sleep. Don't resign yourself to a hibernation of hopelessness. Listen! God is calling you and me and all God's people to a life of faith and hope and joyful expectation that comes from God's dream being born again...in us today. This is the dream we first received at baptism. And this is the dream renewed every time we share the bread and cup, the meal Jesus our Emmanuel instituted in the night many thought the dream would surely die. So let us obey with joy and embrace the dream, whose roots are in God, not in us. And let us follow where God leads, confident of the new day that is dawning when there will be new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells and peace is everywhere at home.