

Sermon for December 24, 2022—“A Carpenter’s Dreams”

Christmas Eve, Year A—Texts: Isaiah 9:1a, 2; Matthew 1:18-25

Good evening, I should probably introduce myself. My name is Joseph. Joseph ben Jacob. I’ve been hanging around your celebration of Christmas for quite a while but I suspect you don’t know me too well. I feel sort of like the father of the bride at a wedding. Nobody pays much attention to him, but he gets to pay the bills. I know how much you enjoy celebrating Christmas but I want to tell you, your Christmas cost me a great deal!

My family is an old and honorable one, probably with more emphasis on the old than the honorable! I am from the tribe of Judah. My ancestor was King David. But that isn’t much to boast about. Not anymore. He lived a thousand years before I was born, so by my time there were hundreds and thousands of descendants.

Now, some of you may be wondering, what’s my story. Where to start? Well, I grew up in Bethlehem. It’s only a few miles from Jerusalem and making a living was difficult. So as a young man I moved to Nazareth. Nazareth was so small; I’m always amazed nowadays when I meet people who know about it. It was a small town, usually, the butt of jokes. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” people used to joke. But I didn’t go to Nazareth for the night life, I went there to find work.

I’m a wood worker, a carpenter. I do things like build furniture, frame houses, make tools and yoke for oxen. If it’s made out of wood, I’m your man. But wood workers are practical people. I like things you can handle and see—that you can measure, cut and saw. Wood is honest. Wood has integrity. I like that. I like that in people too.

Another thing that you should know about me is that my neighbors call me a “righteous man.” That’s me, I guess. I mean, I try to be. I don’t go around preaching to people or looking down my nose at others. I believe it’s important to have integrity. If a person believes something they should live it.

Anyway, it was there in Jerusalem where I met Mary. She was about 15 years old then. I wasn’t much older. Mary was a wonderful girl, I loved her so. We were betrothed. That’s a little like your engagement, only much more permanent. It lasts a year, sometimes longer. What’s more, it can only be broken by divorce. Which isn’t easy—you need a very good reason. Like adultery. It’s pretty disgraceful.

After we became betrothed, I dreamt of the life Mary and I would have together. About building a home for us and the children we’d have. How wonderful it would all be. It’s funny how quickly things can go wrong. How quickly dreams can turn into nightmares? How easily your fondest desires can shatter? Perhaps you’ve had that experience.

I noticed that Mary became quiet, withdrawn. She wouldn’t tell me what was wrong. I wondered if I had done something to displease her or her family? Finally, she told me, but I wasn’t prepared for her answer. “I’m pregnant!” She began to cry. I felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. I knew I wasn’t the father, but—who was? How could this happen? What about our dreams? Why? How could she do this?

She finally found the courage to tell me her story. She told me that an angel had appeared to her and told her that she was going to be the mother of the Son of God. The Spirit of God had come upon her and planted a baby in her womb. I was furious!

It was one thing for her to betray me, but it was another thing entirely to tell me a story like that, one that bordered on blasphemy. Do I look like an idiot? I wouldn't believe it. Who would? I was so angry—and hurt. The Law said anyone who committed adultery should be stoned to death. I'll admit, I wanted to get back at her, for betraying my faith and trust, for ruining my reputation—but this...I mean, everyone would assume that I was the father. I had to do the right thing.

But after much prayer, I decided I could not tell the elders. I still loved Mary, even after what she'd done. I decided to get a couple of my friends, get divorced privately, and that would be that. It was my prerogative as her betrothed. Without a complaint from me nothing could legally be done to Mary. But it was clear that Mary had to go away. At least for a while. So she went south, to Hebron, to stay with her cousin Elizabeth. It turned out that she was expecting a baby as well. After that, things were pretty much a blur. I don't remember much about those days, except to say that I got a lot of work done. It was then that the dreams started.

In one particularly vivid dream, an angel spoke to me, telling me to not be afraid. "Joseph," the angel said, "don't be afraid to take Mary for your wife. The child she bears is from the Holy Spirit. You will call him Jesus and he will save his people from their sins." That was my dream. But, dreams come to prophets, not wood workers. Right? And I couldn't talk about it with anyone without revealing Mary's secret. What was I to do? But the dreams kept coming. Each one the same. I quickly realized that I needed to make a decision. I decided to trust God. Nothing would ever be the same.

I decided to go to Hebron. I told Mary about my dreams and apologized for doubting her. I took her back to Nazareth and we planned to get married as soon as possible. It would be rough, sure—but we both trusted God. I had no idea how rough things would get. I know you've heard about Caesar's decree about the tax census. But try travelling 90 miles, in the winter, with pregnant woman in her third trimester, riding a donkey. Let me tell you—they're not pleasant travelling companions.

When we got to Bethlehem, it was jam packed. People everywhere! My relatives had no place for us. The inns were all booked solid. We finally found some shelter in a stable that someone had hollowed out of the rock. And when the baby finally came, Mary had to do it all herself. Carpentry, I know. Delivering babies? Not so much! You'd think if God had been planning this for years, that some better arrangements might've been made—oh well.

But after that—life still didn't settle down. Life with Jesus—Yeshua we called him—was never dull. A visit from three astrologers. Having to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's soldiers. And so much more. There are many stories, but there isn't enough time to tell them all. I appreciate you listening to what I have to say.

What I will say before I go, is that when I was younger, I thought that if I ever saw an angel I'd never have any doubts. I saw an angel, of that there's no doubt. But there were still many, many questions. To his mother and I, Yeshua didn't seem like he would be the Savior of the world—at least not in the earlier years. Quite the contrary. He seemed fairly ordinary. He was no different than any other children in Nazareth. He cried when he was hungry. He needed changed—often. When he wouldn't go to sleep, I held him and told him stories until he fell asleep. When he fell and skinned his knee, it bled. But as he got older, it became clearer.

Now, some of you have a deep and abiding faith like Mary. Some of you are more like me. You live in a world of cause and effect. You believe your doubts. You doubt your beliefs. I get that. I've been there. All I can say is that when faced with such questions, especially questions about God—I chose to have faith. I believed, I trusted, even when it was hard. I did what God asked me to do. I tried to protect them, provide for them. I loved them as best I could. I think that's all anyone **can** do. And what I learned is when we hold tight to our faith, God will provide.

I've heard it said that “faith is honoring God and people,” that “faith is also integrity and responsibility.” For me, in the end, faith is obedience. Faith is about trust in God—about saying yes to God—as Mary did in accepting her responsibility.

How could I do any less? How can any of us?

Come, Yeshua. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.