

Good Advice

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 2:1-23

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Matthew 2:1-23

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." 7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. 17 Then was fulfilled what had

been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." 19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." 21 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."



"Mary. Wake up, Mary. I've just had another dream and we have to go to Egypt. Tonight. Mary, wake up."

Imagine being awakened in the middle of a lovely night's sleep with those words whispered in your ear. "Wake up, sleepy head. Time to go to Egypt."

Time for the old roll-over-pull-the-covers-over-your-head whine, "Aww ... geeeee ... I donwannagotoegyptonite ... doihavta?"

"C'mon Mary. It was the angel again. We have to go! Please wake up."

This scenario suggests that either (1) Joseph was delusional or (2) something pretty spectacular really happened to him. Let's explore those options.

One. Let's face it, Joseph could very well have been delusional. I know that because in reading this story I am reminded of three photographs in my own family archives that suggest a rationale for a young father's delusions. The first one is a picture of me the day that we brought our first baby home from the hospital. I'm

stretched out on the sofa and Tim, 5 days old (he's now 25 years old), is in his baby carrier propped up against the sofa -- both of us are sound asleep. The caption says: "Timmy and Dad all worn out!" Rightly so -- every dad knows, birthin' a baby is hard work!

The second photograph is about two weeks later, September 21, 1984, my 25th birthday (his age now). I'm sitting in my favorite old arm chair with a tiny baby boy, not even a month old, cradled in my arms. A birthday cake is on a little foot stool in front of us. Idyllic scene, huh? Except that my eyes are half shut. Either the shutter clicked at just the moment when my eyes were blinking or I really looked that dazed on my 25th birthday. I suspect the latter is true.

Third photo. This one is of the whole family, Mom, Dad, Timmy about a month later, snapped after church one Sunday morning. I'm holding Tim who is sleeping peacefully. My tie is pulled slightly askew. This time Mom's eyes are half closed. And neither of us look like we could change one more diaper or survive one more sleep-deprived night let alone a lifetime of child rearing.

Those are some of my favorite photographs because it reminds me just how exhausted I was as a new parent. (Certainly I'm not like that as an old, experienced dad!)

Carefully considering those three photos, I believe it's quite possible that Joseph was delusional. Any new father suffering from new parent syndrome might easily believe that angels spoke in his dreams. Eyes half closed most of the time, baby's awake when he and Mary are trying to sleep, diapers to be changed, bottles to be warmed, and that's on top of all the routine stuff that has to get done just for family survival -- work and food, the mortgage, taxes for the Temple and Rome.

So maybe it was in response to new parent syndrome that Joseph rolled over one night and gently tapped Mary on the shoulder. "Mary, let's go to Egypt." Stranger things have happened to new

parents, haven't they? So they fell outta bed, packed up the SUV, and headed off to the unknown.

Okay, so maybe Joseph was delusional. It's possible. I know I did some pretty suspicious things when I was a new dad. But there's also a second possibility here, one that I think is probably more accurate. That is that something pretty spectacular happened to Joseph to get him to pick up his family and head off to Egypt.

Joseph's a pretty good guy according to Matthew's Gospel. Luke's Gospel spends most of its story talking about Mary and her part in Jesus' birth. But for Matthew, Joseph plays the more important role. It was Joseph, "a righteous man", who was going to do the honorable thing according to Jewish law and dismiss Mary once he discovered she was with child. It was Joseph to whom God spoke through an angel and who did what the angel said by marrying Mary. It was Joseph to whom God revealed that this baby was to be Emmanu-el, "God-with-us". It was Joseph who, according to Matthew, has the genealogical link to King David. It was Joseph to whom the angels spoke.

I don't think that's delusion. I think that's reality, because I am convinced that God speaks to all of us all of the time. Sometimes in dreams, sometimes in whispers, sometimes only after a kick in the seat. But God does speak to us and then we have to decide what to do with what God says. Most of the time we probably don't even hear it; other times we probably choose not to hear it. But God speaks to us none the less.

Joseph heard that night. Joseph heard the angel deliver God's message and he had to make a decision. Like anyone to whom God speaks, Joseph had to make a decision. He could either heed the advice and go to Egypt or he could ignore the advice and head the opposite direction. Decision-time.

In a book called "Overcoming Indecisiveness", Theodore Rubin suggests that "the world is divided unequally between decision-makers and abdicators." Most people, he says, are more comfortable with abdicating than with making decisions. A man sits in a restaurant and stares at a menu unable to make a decision until his wife orders and then he orders whatever she does. It's not necessarily what he wants but it's easier than making a decision for himself. There are also compulsive rebels who wait to see what the other person decides and then intentionally choose to decide in the opposite direction no matter where it leads. These are pseudo-decisions, Rubin says. Most of us can't or won't or don't make real decisions.

Joseph had to make a decision. I suspect in his position I might have made a pseudo-decision by waking Mary and asking her opinion and then gone with it. "Okay, Mary, if you think it's a good idea, then let's go." Or maybe I would have taken the rebellious stance and done exactly the opposite of what the angels told me, "I'm my own man. I'll decide where my family is going. We're headed to Florida for New Year's, not Egypt."

But not Joseph. He made a real decision. He thought the angels brought some good advice and he decided to follow it. All the way to Egypt he followed it. And there they settled down.

Until ...

"Mary. Mary, wake up. The angel again. We have to go back to Israel. Mary, wake up."

"Again with the angel thing, Joseph? Are you sure because I don't want to get there and have to turn around and come back again. We've just gotten to know the neighbors and Jesus is growing up nicely here. Can't we just stay?"

"The angel, Mary. The angel came to me in my dream again. You know what that means. We have to go back."

So they packed up their belongings again and headed back to Israel. And when they got there, the angel became a little more specific and sent them to Galilee so Jesus could grow up in Nazareth.

What a guy this Joseph is. While he might very easily have brushed off the dreams as merely exhaustion brought on by new parent syndrome, he chose to listen closely to the angel and to respond to God's call in a way that led him to places where he might never have led himself. By doing so, Joseph encountered God in a new way.

Theologian Marcus Borg says that the notion of there being two worlds, a world of reality and a world of Spirit, has been central to virtually every culture in history, including ours. "The notion of a 'world of Spirit' is a vague and difficult notion in the contemporary world," Borg writes, "By it I mean another dimension or layer or level of reality in addition to the visible world of our ordinary experience." It is that world of Spirit that Joseph entered when he listened to the angels.

In our faith tradition, there have always been visionaries who have been the link for us between these two worlds. They have opened doors to the world of the Spirit, says Marcus Borg, and we have been able to peek in because of it. Abraham saw visions and spoke with heavenly visitors who came knocking at his tent door. Jacob saw a ramp into heaven, "the gate of heaven", connecting earth with heaven. Moses, one who "knew God face to face", came down from Sinai with his appearance changed by the encounter. John in Revelation writes of the heavens being opened; Paul in his vision is "caught up into the third heaven"; and Jesus suggests to us that if we knock, the door will be opened for us. A gate into the other world -- an opening into the world of the Spirit.

God spoke to these visionaries, they opened the door so that we could experience the presence of God, and they shared God's vision with us.

That's what Joseph is in this story. Not only is he a dedicated dad and a dreamer, but he is a visionary, a door-opener, a mediator between the visible world and the world of Spirit. The angels spoke to him very clearly and gave him advice. "Joseph, get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you." "Joseph, get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking his life are dead."

With this encounter, Joseph opened a door into the world of Spirit and we peeked in. And there we found God giving advice.

"Get up ... go ... do ... be ..." From Israel to Egypt to Israel to Galilee. Good advice --or better yet God-advice -- led Joseph on a journey far beyond any ordinary journey that he might have taken. God led him into the wilderness and back to a place that had been promised.

But was this a journey beyond the ordinary for Joseph? Did he do more than any other new dad would have done? Did Joseph do any more than God would require of each of us every day? If God speaks to each of us, perhaps it is to let us know just exactly what should be ordinary for us. And sometimes ordinary for us – for a people of faith – is very different from ordinary for others.

"In a world of fugitives, the person taking the opposite direction will appear to run away," wrote T.S. Eliot. If we are living in a world of fugitives, a world where everyone is running away from each other, and God calls us to the opposite direction which is toward each other, when we respond to that call it might just look like we're running away from where everyone else is going. But maybe that's not so bad. Maybe as people faithful to God's call, that is our "ordinary". Maybe that's the advice that God gives us everyday and when we respond to it we are not doing something extraordinary but rather we are only doing what is required of us by God anyway. The magi went home by a different road, Matthew's Gospel tells us. They were running in the opposite

direction from the world's direction but they weren't running away – they were running to God's call.

God calls us to each other. The world creates an opportunity for us to be fugitives from each other but God calls us in an opposite direction than those who run from each other. And by deciding to respond to God's call, we look very different from the rest of the world -- just like Joseph and Mary must have looked taking their Jewish family into the land of the Roman stronghold, in an opposite direction from those who were running from the Romans. Just like the magi looked moving contrary to protocol in the opposite direction from the one who ruled the land they were visiting.

"[T]he world needs the church," writes Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon in *Resident Aliens*, "because, without the church, the world does not know who it is. The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people. The way for the world to know that it needs redeeming, that it is broken and fallen, is for the church to enable the world to strike hard against something which is an alternative to what the world offers."

What the world offers is fugitive status, people constantly running away from each other. What God has to offer is a call, a message delivered in dreams or by angels or by visions or by whispers. God's message to us is delivered by those that we encounter daily in our lives, those that reach out to us for help, for prayer, for love, for a shoulder to cry on. God's message is not about running away from each other but about running toward each other. God's message is one of compassion and inclusion and caring and peace. God's message is one of justice.

I think it was no accident that God's advice led Joseph to save the person who became the greatest of the visionaries who let us peek into the world of the Spirit, Jesus of Nazareth. And I think it was no accident that when grown into manhood and ready to begin his ministry, that very same Jesus focused on justice by announcing to

the world, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And I think that it is no accident that those that we might call visionaries in our century – those who let us peek into the world of Spirit -- people like Deitrich Bonhoffer, Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr, Mother Theresa, and others, all proclaim a message of justice.

God's message to us is about justice in our world. And it is good advice which leads us to who knows where, but somewhere we have to go. Joseph did. Mary did. The magi did. Jesus did. We must as well.

Every year we make New Year's resolutions. "I'll stop smoking," "I'll eat better and lose 10 pounds," "I'll take out the trash every night," "I'll be nicer to my neighbors," "I'll go to church more regularly." "No, really, this year I mean it."

But those resolutions are not in response to God's message. They are in response to conscience or guilt or vanity or peer pressure. God's message is not so easy to discern. Maybe you don't get an angel to bring you the message. Maybe nobody taps you on the shoulder in the middle of a good night's sleep and says, "Let's go to Egypt." Maybe you don't have to pick up and move across the desert to save your family.

But you do have to hear about earthquakes and mudslides and raging wildfires and terror alerts. And you do have to hear about senseless death in Iraq and Afghanistan and racism and police corruption and violence and homelessness and drug abuse. And you do have to hear about urban decay and babies being left under park benches and radical, orthodox Christian extremists. God is there, everywhere that the world cries tears of injustice. God is there. Everyday and in every imaginable way, God is there in your life speaking to you. We must listen -- individually as Christians; corporately as the Church.

Listen to the advice. Follow it where it leads.

As children of a God whose message is justice, maybe it would be more worthwhile if we made only one serious resolution, one faithful covenant, one Spirit-filled re-commitment this year; one resolution that would help us discern what it is that God speaks into our lives.

Let me suggest this one. "This year, I'll listen for God's advice and follow it where it leads." Simple. Unnerving, perhaps; anxiety-producing, perhaps; but simple. Yet it's good advice. Ask Joseph.

Amen.