

The Vigil of the Epiphany/2nd Sunday after Christmas Isa. 61 Mat. 2:19ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Within a very few hours following midnight on Christmas Day, a quick run through and listening to music on the radio made it clear that we had reverted to secular time, if in fact we had ever really left it. Not a hymn or even a good old ‘White Christmas’ was to be found. So much for the twelve days, etc. However, the auto-search button did land on an ‘oldies’ station and the Everly Brothers (remember them?) melodiously crooned their 1950’s hit, “All I Have to Do is Dream”, with phrases like, “Whenever I want you, in my arms...All I have to do is dream.” A sudden punch of the presets and a modern rock channel blasted out some unrecognized tune, and then the next selection up was Steven Tyler, Aerosmith, and their hit, “Dream On..dream on till your dreams come true.” Your erstwhile Rector decided to do an internet search and discovered that over 121,000 songs refer to dreams. It appears that culturally hope, anticipation, or wish fulfillment are all alive and well.

An uneducated guess is that every sentient being, and especially we humans, dream and do so regularly. We know our children do because they confuse and combine their dreams with reality. We have to comfort them when in the late hours they experience a nightmare that is real enough in appearance to shatter their comfort. We have those dreams that make us smile and allow us to get beyond the boundaries of the everyday grind, and at least for a few moments, become free. And we have likely all experienced the type that make no sense at all; where unconnected people and events mix and collide in a collage of silliness. Psychoanalysts from Freud to Jung propose that our dreams are the unconscious self, working out conflicts, that are too threatening to face when we are fully awake. Perhaps some of that is accurate. But more recent research indicates that dreams may have another important function in the real world. It may be that they are windows on what concerns us most, AND allow us to prepare and workout how we may face challenges that are new, disturbing, or even offer meaningful life changes. They may in fact be more than just ‘nonsense’.

By now I am hoping that someone among us is asking, “Father, what in the world does any of this have to do with our faith and lives?” My alter ego asks as well, and the response it gets is, “I’m glad you asked.” This isn’t a homily about soothsaying or palm reading or phrenology. Hopefully, if you have read or followed St. Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus, you will have noticed a few fascinating items.

One is the amazing parallels between this story of Jesus, his parents, Egypt, and Herod on the one hand, and that of Moses, his adoptive mother, Egypt, and Pharaoh—epics of slavery and exodus. Matthew presents Jesus to us as a deliverer and a gift, as the Magi presented gifts. And like his predecessor Jesus will defeat the darkness that too often shrouds worldly power.

A second curious thing is that tomorrow we get the Magi coming to present the Epiphany gifts, and yet today they have left before they even arrived. The Church has transposed these aspects of the texts, and it is probably no accident. Perhaps the purpose is to get us to really pay attention to the central story and figure of the Messiah who journeys through a world riveted with characters unsavory in order to bring light and life.

And third, from the end of the first to the close of the second chapter of Matthew’s work, there are five references to dreams. Let’s be clear that Scripture is carefully dubious about putting too

much stock in dreamwork. It isn't that God cannot use them to get our attention, but rather how easily people can take a dream and see in it what they want to see, and even more turn it into some new revelation meant only for them. So, what is Matthew presenting? These dreams always point away from the person to the purposes of God, and they always move from 'vision' to action. We find Joseph in his doubts about Mary dreaming and **awakening** (we will get to that shortly), the Magi and Joseph in dreams coming to recognize the **warnings and threats of an unredeemed world**, and finally Joseph by way of a dream going on exodus out of Egypt toward **home and that future which will unfold** for them and for us. It is just possible that we, by being let in on these stellar moments, are gaining a vision of who Jesus the Messiah is, and what he calls us to be.

This first experience of Joseph with Mary, which we read earlier, is not an isolated event. No, I don't mean the pregnancy! It is about the human journey of people of faith who have to acknowledge sometimes God is present and works through persons and events that by other measures would be ignored. Joseph awakens, Matthew tells us. Not just from a good nap, but from the cloud of his doubts and troubles to see the mystery we call God at work around and in his life. The only way that was possible is for the doubts to be real and the trust deep. He awakens to God. It leads to the question: Where have you seen God at work in your travel thru life? It requires the suspension of boxing God into our expectations. When I was a Divinity student there was a friend who came from the Unitarian tradition and often there were lively debates and discussions. On one occasion in talking about faith he commented that faith was whatever he believed. He was asked 'belief in what'? His answer was something like he had faith in faith. That is not Matthew's storyline. For Joseph it is awakening to faith in someone particular—the God of Israel who works through and in history—personal histories like yours and mine.

The second set of dreams are warnings. Being people of faith does not mean being naïve about the darkness and threats of the world and unredeemed power brokers. Herod was paranoid and dangerous. Joseph takes Mary and Jesus and flees because it is a matter of life and death. Herod is always about death. Matthew tells us he was troubled by the idea of the birth of this child and all Jerusalem with him. Of course, Jerusalem was troubled; it knew Herod's capacities, and so do we. Jesus' birth into this world did not suddenly make all light and joy and peace. Maybe we get this text before Epiphany to show just what the glory of God is coming to redeem. Herod is alive and well in hatred that blocks compassion and love; in sacrificing the well-being of others to maintain power; in the words we can use as weapons rather than the speech of healing and love. It is the shadow of sin—Herod—that makes the coming of the Messiah even more a matter of joy and of celebration. We cannot sanitize the world into which Jesus was and continues to be born; his life and sacrifice are what undo the brokenness.

The last dream, the dream to arise (interesting word because it is the word we translate as resurrection) and go to Israel is about recognizing that God is constantly creating new beginnings. God is constantly seeking to make this place, this world and our hearts more holy—more reflective of his great love. I wonder where and with whom God is calling you to see his presence and find new hope? Might it be in your family, or at the urban ministry with the transitional folks of our community, or in a simple visit to one who cannot return the favor? I suspect that in my life the reason I do not awaken and catch a glimpse of God's activity in, around, and through me is that my attention is distracted by inner clutter and darkness. It should catch our attention that Herod's progeny continued to be present in Joseph's and Mary's world, BUT at some point they were captured less by that chatter than by their trust and hope that God is good on his promises. The

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

birth of the Messiah is the light in which all is truly seen. What dreams has God given you to dream, and to follow? Amen+