

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
December 18, 2016

**“Joseph: Dreamer of Dreams”**

“... an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream  
and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid ...’  
Matthew 1:20

**PRELUDE**

Almost 30 years ago - in 1987 -  
a book was published entitled  
***Where's Waldo***. We had a young  
child in the house at the time,  
and it proved to be a big hit.

***Where's Waldo*** was the work of  
Martin Hanford, an illustrator adept  
at drawing elaborate crowd scenes.  
In the book, Hanford's scenes  
spread over two pages;  
and within each crowd scene,  
different though they would be,  
you could always find Waldo.  
But Waldo was not always  
easy to find.  
To spot Waldo, you had to be patient  
and look carefully.  
Otherwise, he'd be overlooked,  
and remain undiscovered, unknown  
amidst the mass of so many others.

Waldo came to mind this week as I was  
pondering Joseph,  
husband to Mary and  
father to Jesus,  
and his place in our Christmas story.  
Joseph has a reserved seat in

Christian nativity scenes,  
but he rarely gets star billing.  
And while always included,  
he is often overlooked  
and underappreciated.

When I think of the Christmas crèche  
employed by my family when I was a child,  
Joseph was identified by deduction.  
He wasn't the angel;  
he wasn't one of the magi bearing gifts;  
he was quite similar in appearance  
to a shepherd, but the shepherd  
always carried a lamb,  
which was a giveaway clue.  
Joseph was known and identifiable  
by who he wasn't.

The Joseph in our Plymouth nativity is  
dressed in a purple-tinged undergarment,  
with red colored cuffs; a gold cincture is  
belted around his waist, a brown cloak,  
with white lining is draped over his shoulders.

Our Plymouth Joseph has the look of a European:  
fair haired, lightly colored.  
I'm guessing his Ancestry.com DNA test  
would designate him of Scandinavian descent.

Interesting, too, that he is rather oddly bent,  
more crook in his neck than in the staff he holds  
and upon which he leans;  
it is an awkward pose, and it makes you wonder  
whether he has had  
too much yoga practice  
or not enough.

Interesting also are depictions of Joseph  
in paintings, with artists imagining Joseph,

sometimes as a young man,  
but more often older, not so fit  
to sire a son or infringe upon

Mary's virginity.

Placement of Joseph at  
the manger also varies -  
he can be seen kneeling or standing,  
sometimes close to Mary,  
sometimes opposite at a distance;  
sometimes postured in prayer,  
sometimes being domestic -  
tending a fire, fixing food.

This year, I've read, a "**hipster nativity**" has been  
making the rounds:

Mary is wearing a low-cut shirt,  
holding a Starbucks coffee cup in one hand,  
while flashing a peace sign with the other.  
A shepherd is there with an I-pad of sorts,  
Snapchatting messages.

The "**wise men**" are present; they rode in  
on Segways, bearing Amazon gift boxes;  
the stable sports solar panels on the roof.  
And Joseph? Joseph is equipped  
with a smart phone, is taking a "**selfie.**"

It is very entertaining, a novelty nativity  
suited for the 21st century.

Does it speak of wonder, mystery, awe?  
I'm not so sure. It is neat and nice,  
but with little hint of something new  
and life transforming having entered the world,  
and little hint of danger lurking near.  
You can order your own -it retails for \$130 -  
as long as supply lasts.

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

We credit the author of Matthew  
for giving Joseph a centered role to play  
in the birth of Jesus.

Joseph - like his Genesis namesake - is  
the beneficiary and recipient  
of graceful dreams.

Joseph, son of David,  
betrothed to Mary,  
is “dreamer of dreams” -  
neurological texting  
that takes place while we slumber,  
to inform and enlighten and  
obligate our lives.

In our Bible, dreams are not always viewed with favor;  
there is ambiguity, suspicion, with regard to dreams  
and what role they purpose in our lives.

Some dreamers are schemers at odds with  
the inclinations of the Holy Spirit.  
In Deuteronomy, the “**dreamer of dreams**”  
is viewed with some suspicion.  
They pose a threat to people;  
though they may speak with the tongues of angels,  
yet they may appeal to base instincts -  
“let us make ourselves great again.”  
Such divining - according to Deuteronomy -  
may come to test, to determine  
“**whether you indeed love the Lord your God  
with all your heart and soul**” (Deuteronomy 13:3).

False dreamers are harshly judged in Deuteronomy.  
Indeed, they are to be “**put to death**”  
for it is death they dream;  
**for having spoken treason  
against the Lord** (Deuteronomy 13:05).

Zechariah is yet another instance where the leadership is discredited for seeing “**lies**,” telling false dreams giving empty consolation, causing God’s people to wander and suffer for tweets of treachery and self-promotion. (see Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, pg. 570-571).

What do the dreams of Joseph disclose?

- (1) The angels speak, fear not to take Mary, to stand by her, beside her, to be guardian and guide and protector from the scandal affixed to her.
- (2) Joseph’s dreams round out the significance of Jesus – and the sacred he reveals. “**God with us**” – Emanuel. Though God is great – transcendent – God “condescends” – the “immensity” of God is “cloistered” in a womb, made “**weak enough**” to enter the world, to save the world, for love of the world.
- (3) The dreams helped Joseph navigate – on behalf of the holy family – in a world filled with danger.
  - (a) “The Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream ... Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt ... (Matthew 2:13)
  - (b) “An angel ... appeared in a dream ... Get up, move on ... return to Israel” (Matthew 2:19 – on Herod’s death)
  - (c) Warned in a dream, “he went away to Galilee,” contacted a real estate agent in Nazareth.

In each dream, Joseph is prompted to act.  
The dream never serves simply to flame a feeling;  
the dream initiates movement, it spurs an action.

\*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*

Joseph – father of Jesus by way of adoption; he **“took him on”**  
as his own. He provided, he sided; he overcame his fears.  
Joseph doesn’t appear to have been around for long –  
but he was around long enough – to have served and advanced  
the sacred story that is ours today. Through Joseph, we are  
given an understanding of Emmanuel – God being near;  
God being with us.

It was Kahlil Gibran who once said:  
**“Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden  
the gate to eternity.”**

Trust the dream. But also I add,  
test the dreams.  
Do our dreams foster hope,  
and peace and love?

Do our dreams  
spice with joy  
the lives of others?

Do our dreams advance and defend and  
honor what we hold to be sacred and true?

\*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*           \*\*\*\*\*

There has been much talk of late  
about **“fake news.”**

Fake news – twisted tales, planted for pay,  
designed to mislead, to misinform.  
It is not just climate deniers that spin and twist;

tabloid journalism is mainstream  
the moon landing was fake;  
9/11 was fake;  
the Sandy Hook massacre was faked.  
Nothing seems beyond the bounds  
of run-amuck imagination.

There is a legitimate concern.  
For powers play upon our lives with  
malicious intent to deceive;  
powers at play that come to disparage and dismiss  
what the best minds among us would reveal to us  
for our good.

Did you happen to notice -  
the Oxford English Dictionary recently disclosed its  
“Word of the Year” for 2016.  
The word of year: “**Post-truth**” -  
a reference to circumstances in which  
emotional appeal takes priority over  
factual accuracy.

**Post-truth** - its usage spiked this year,  
after the Brexit vote in the UK,  
during and after our presidential election.

This has inspired some to call 2016  
“the Year of the Lie.”

Never have so many  
cared so little  
about lying.

Who knew that mendacity  
could reach such heights  
of contempt for what is  
just and honorable and true?

It calls to mind the playwright,  
Tennessee Williams, whose character Brick,  
in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, speaks:  
“**Mendacity is a system we live in.**”

**Liquor is one way out an' death's the other."**

When truth is held in such low regard,  
when so crudely manipulated for  
for personal gain or party profit,  
the people are always in danger.

Which is why we, as Christians, in church,  
pray for courage to speak the truth,  
to defend the truth, to discern the truth,  
when truth is under assault.

Jesus Christ was born to set us free,  
from deceit,  
from sin and shame,  
from bondage to fear  
maintained by powers that  
twitter  
their own glory.

This is a truth we cherish.

So - let us be dreamers that advance  
the glorious reign of God's love and peace.  
Let us be dreamers.

Trust your dreams.  
Test your dreams.

Pray your dreams align  
with the love  
that has come to us in the wonderful Child - Jesus.  
When our lives are aligned with the  
love of Jesus - all will be well, in life, in death,  
and in whatever follows.  
This, too, is a truth we cherish.

CONCLUSION:

Holy Communion is a first  
Line of Defense

in a Post-Truth Age.  
Here we recall the ancient ways;  
here we commune with grace;  
here we are fortified for all the  
    challenges of life we cannot  
    and dare not escape;  
here we experience what is so fleeting  
    in our lives,  
a unity of hope and a resolve to  
    walk the Jesus way.

The bread and cup have passed through many hands.  
What they signify truth is worth defending;  
    may we be grateful to receive;  
    may we be faith to the God-with-us.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*