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Advent 4A
Matthew 1: 18-25

Do you remember your dreams? What did you dream about last night? Or do your dreams disappear upon opening your eyes? Or do your dreams stay with you long after you wake up?

I once dreamt that Brad Pitt had died of a heart attack. And the dream was so vivid that when I woke up I checked my news feed to see if it was true. And of course, it wasn't. As far as I know Brad Pitt is still alive and doing whatever it is he's doing.

But made me wonder, "Why was I dreaming about Brad Pitt? Was Scarlett Johanssen unavailable that night?"

Many people take dreams seriously. Some say dreams are your mind's way of processing the day's events. Others say dreams are portals to a different dimension. And others say that dreams can warn us of future dangers. Yet others say that dreams are the way dead people talk to us.

I don't know if any of that is true, but I do think it's important to pay attention to your dreams. They're saying something to you. It would serve you well to listen.

I'm sure Joseph in today's bible reading was glad he listened to his dream. It put the whole -ahem- *incident* in perspective.

His fiance, Mary, tells him she's pregnant, and he's pretty sure the baby isn't his. He'd remember something like that. Then Mary makes up this story about getting pregnant by the Holy Spirit. So, she didn't just cheat on him, she's a religious nut too. Probably delusional.

Excellent.

Joseph could have created a stink over this, and gotten Mary into even more trouble. But then again, even if people would see Joseph as the victim, it would still be pretty humiliating for him. First Century Israel wasn't exactly a bastion of enlightened manhood. He'd always be the guy whose fiancée got pregnant by another man.

So Joseph decides on a quick, dirty, and, most importantly, quiet end to their engagement. The other guy can have her.

So that night, probably after an evening out with the boys to drown his sorrows over losing this relationship, Joseph falls asleep. The same angel that appeared to Mary appears

to Joseph in a dream. The angel says,

“Joseph, son of David, do NOT be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her IS from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’

The story says that Joseph did just as the angel commanded. He married her, and raised Jesus as his own.

More importantly, he believed Mary. And he realized that she was put in an even worse spot than he was. He could just walk away. She had to live with the consequences. He could have turned against her. She could have been left on her own to raise the child.

I think there was regret in Joseph’s heart for not believing Mary in the first place. I think he felt some shame for thinking about himself first, and not realizing what would happen to Mary if he left her.

Of course that’s hindsight. And hindsight has a pretty easy record.

But in the moment, the Holy Spirit placed a potential bomb in their lives, threatening to blow up their relationship, and imperil the rest of Mary’s life.

We think of Mary's story as a lovely miracle, a virginal young woman becoming pregnant with God's child, then a young man stepping in to form a Holy Family.

However, if we dig deeper into the story, as we have seen, it's not that clean or picturesque. We have to wipe some dirt off the stained glass version of this story that we usually tell this time of year. This episode could have ended badly for everyone. God took a risk. Not just a risk on Mary. But also a risk on Joseph.

Having this episode end well hinged on Joseph doing the right thing. And from what we had seen, that was NOT a foregone conclusion.

Why WOULD Joseph listen to what this angel had to say? It was a dream. Do we really make important life decisions based on what we dream about at night? How did Joseph know that what the angel said was true? He was a carpenter, not a mystic sage. He was pragmatic, not impulsive.

For whatever reason, the angel's message in his dream rang true to him. And his life moved in a direction that he never would have planned for. And Mary's life took a turn she never would have imagined if left to herself.

Both Mary and Joseph had to do the hard work of discernment of where God was leading them. They had to put aside their preconceived notions of where their lives were going. And together, they walked into God's future, a future that changed the destiny of the world, as she carried God's eternal promises in her womb.

Do you listen to your dreams? Not just your sleeping dreams, but also your waking dreams? Do you listen to what your life is telling you? How do you discern what God is telling you? How do you discern where God is guiding you? That's hard work. But important work.

When I turned 50, I needed time to stop and reflect. Hitting the half-century mark, and recognizing that odds are that there's more time behind me than in front of me, made me stop and *discern* what I want the next 50 years to bring me.

That discernment has taken the form of conversation, prayer, reading, reflection, writing, and most importantly, listening. Listening to the story that my life has been telling so far. Listening for themes that are emerging. Listening for what people are telling me, and NOT telling me.

Listening to the emotions that have guided me. Listening to what my thoughts have been saying to me. Listening to those moments of disappointment, frustration, and failure.

Listening to those moments of compromise, mediocrity, and regret. Listening to those moments when hope felt distant. Those moments of anger and disconnection with both myself and those around me. Those are moments of revelation and discernment.

And listening to those moments when I felt joy, purpose, and meaning. Listening to those moments when my gifts were used with recognition and appreciation to serve others. Listening to those moments when I felt most alive.

Listening to those moments when I was loved, and when my love was gladly received by someone else when I offered it. Those too are moments of revelation and discernment.

One October when I was home visiting my mom, I sat with a picture of myself taken when I was in grade seven, and I asked myself, “Is my life honouring the hopes, dreams, and ambitions of that little 11-year-old boy, who at that moment the picture was taken had his whole life in front of him? Would he look at who he became and be proud?”

In some ways, I feel like I've failed him. My health isn't where he would want it. He certainly never planned to get divorced, and live away from his children. Nor did he marry a supermodel or become a billionaire like he wanted me to.

But in other ways I feel like I've honoured him well. I have a job I love and that makes an impact, an education that exceeded all his expectations, children whom I love deeply, and a sense of open possibility.

So that child, that 11-year-old boy, that little boy who is still alive within me, keeps challenging me to honour his dreams, because those dreams still live in me, even as those dreams have matured as I've made my way through the decades.

That challenge from that 11-year-old boy takes discernment. It takes honest reflection. It takes asking hard questions. And then, it takes trust and purposeful action.

Like Mary and Joseph, it takes listening, not just listening on your own, but listening with each other, then acting in faith that what is discerned is right and true.

Discernment doesn't stop. Life is a constant quest that

requires ongoing discernment, ongoing listening, ongoing questioning. And ongoing purposeful action.

So what are you dreaming about? What are you discerning? What are the questions your soul is asking? What are you listening for?

In this world of layoffs, economic uncertainty, cultural changes, and social divisions, I think it's more important than ever to listen to your dreams. It's more important than ever to listen to what God is saying through your life. It's more important than ever, to discern together what are lives will look like moving into a future that looks more scary than certain.

Discerning possibilities that were always in front of us. Taking risks that push us to grow. Celebrating our lives, rather than simply living them. Taking control rather than having other people make decisions for us.

That's the hard but important work of discernment. Trusting, like Mary and the angel and Joseph in his dreams, that God is leading us to a future that is filled with promise, and pregnant with possibility. Even if we can't see it just yet.

May we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and confidence to act upon the story that God is telling through our lives.

May this be so among us. Amen.