

“Imagination, Part 2” (Matthew 2:13-23)

Because the first day of January seldom falls on Sunday, being in church is probably not your most common practice for greeting the new year. Indeed, the very fact that you are here today (rather than recuperating from last evening’s observances) may be proof to some that you are taking this church stuff way too seriously!

One of the more *standard* ways of welcoming the New Year, of course, is watching college football bowl games. Now I have long since repented of following college football, and I’m not much for athletic analogies in sermons. But having said that, I do seem to remember from my years in Florida that there was a period where one particularly unpopular team from that state won five national championships over a period of less than two decades. Talk to any fan of that team, and you will find that they have come to consider those titles as their natural birthright. Yet it’s peculiar that in *four* of those five championship seasons, the only reason they even [qualified for/found themselves appearing in] the national title game in the first place was because of a bizarre recurring circumstance in one of their regular season contests—and all four times, it happened against the same team!

Specifically, in each of those four years, the University of Miami won the game that propelled them into the national championship picture only because arch-rival Florida State missed what should have been a simple game-winning field goal from point blank range in the closing seconds. In that decisive moment, the Hurricanes didn’t so much win the game as simply receive the benefit of an opponent’s error. Yet by the second or third time this bizarre scenario unfolded, Miami fans had come to expect it even before it occurred—apparently counting [on] it as part of the way the universe is put together. [And you can see, of course, that I don’t have any emotional investment in that memory!]

Meanwhile, the Christian *liturgical* year began five weeks ago today. And on *this* Sunday the lectionary presents us with a much more important story—but nonetheless, a story of a similar series of near misses. And once again, we the beneficiaries of those events need to be reminded of what a slim thread they hung on. Otherwise, we too might be tempted to receive them simply as “the way things were supposed to be.”

I am speaking, of course, of Matthew’s account of the extraordinary circumstances through which the baby Jesus survives his infancy. Unlike our Christmas Eve celebration of *Luke’s* smoothly unfolding events, in Matthew it’s one cliffhanger after another. First, two Sundays ago, we heard how an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and brings strange news. Mary, it seems, has been found to be with child

from the Holy Spirit. And despite the overwhelming expectations of moral teaching and social convention, Joseph decides to believe this strange dream and to follow through with the marriage and to name the child as instructed.

And now, in today's reading, we hear how Joseph is visited in dreams a second, third, and fourth time—each of them a call to take highly unusual and inconvenient actions in order to safeguard the life of the infant Jesus [and his mother]. When [King] Herod becomes jealous at news of the birth of a new king, Joseph obeys the angel of the Lord and flees to Egypt with the holy family—thus avoiding the tragic slaughter of all the infant boys in and around Bethlehem. Then when he learns in a dream that Herod is dead, he trusts the dream that it is safe to return to their homeland. But when he learns in a subsequent dream that Bethlehem is still not safe because of Herod's son, he is willing to go make a fresh start in a new place.

Now, there is so much *else* that *could* be said about the way Matthew tells this story—not the least of which is the elegant theological symbolism of these events. Listen closely to the string of close calls surrounding the birth and survival of the Christ child, and you will hear an echo of the many Old Testament cliffhangers by which the story of God's people was advanced: narrow escapes from slavery through the parting of the [Red/Reed] Sea, or late-in-life births by matriarchs [who were] thought to be barren, thereby enabling the family tree to continue. Or Joseph the NT follower of mysterious dreams, reminiscent of a much, much earlier Joseph the dreamer in the Hebrew scriptures, with *Egypt* in both cases as the unlikely place of sojourning refuge; or the way that Matthew sets up shadows of the birth and childhood of Moses in the infancy of Jesus.

Yes, these are important things to understand about the flavor of Matthew's gospel, and a majority of interpreters and commentators make a compelling case that those broad theological themes are what we should focus on in this passage. But in many of those scholarly analyses, it seems as if Joseph disappears from the picture, becoming simply a passive vehicle through which God's purposes are achieved. So today, let's file a minority report of sorts. As part two of a sermon preached on the Sunday before Christmas, I want call your attention again to the extraordinary courage and inventiveness that Joseph demonstrates. Once again, the quality that Joseph embodies more than any other is *imagination*.

It is imagination that allows him not only to take those dreams seriously, but to hatch creative responses that carve out a safe path for the holy family. Even before that, when he is nudged out of secure obscurity to become the earthly father of this special child, it is imagination that enables him to envision how such things can be possible with God. And when circumstances thrust him from royal treatment at the hands of the Wise Men

into sudden refugee status, it is an act of imagination that enables him to keep his wits about him. It's as if he has time travelled and taken our Presbyterian ordination vows of energy, intelligence, *imagination* and love.

And God knows, on this particular New Year's Day, we *need* the kind of imagination that Joseph has modeled for us. Once again, history seems to have turned on the narrowest of threads. Not just here in the U.S. of A., but in other places around the world, the tide of human affairs appears suddenly to be moving in a very different direction than most of us here had expected. Decades of devotion had gone into causes that many of us regard as sacred values. But just as we appeared on the verge of a breakthrough, the game winning field goal instead drifted wide right. And now abrupt reversals look to be the order of the day.

Perhaps there is no one Herod this time—only the anger of millions around the globe who have felt left behind by a world that is changing too fast for them. But how do we ensure that *their* sense of marginalization doesn't worsen the ongoing slaughter of the innocents that has continued from Herod down to this day? How do we defend those marginalized groups for whom we have so long advocated? How *do* we keep our bearings?

Perhaps Joseph's reaction to sudden reversals of fortune can guide you and me in distinguishing, as he did, those options that lead to bondage and those that lead to life. Can we begin by listening to the dreams that the angel of God whispers in *our* ears? Remember: events can turn on the slightest of threads. When we are down to the crucial turning point, maybe a bit of sacred imagination can be the thing that makes all the difference.

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