

A SERMON FROM ST. PAUL'S, FAYETTEVILLE

# Broken Dreams

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, Rector  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas  
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(**Matthew 1:18-25**) – Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "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." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

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Sometimes dreams get broken.

Joseph grew up dreaming that his life would follow the normal patterns of his expectations. Just like everyone else in his community, his parents arranged his marriage to Mary from their childhood. They would have grown up being engaged to one another. As soon as they were able to bear children, at thirteen or fourteen years of age, they were to be married, to start their own family. That's how it happens. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's the dream that any young man like Joseph might harbor in his heart.

But those dreams were shattered by an unexpected pregnancy. In an honor culture like his, the implications were profound. His honor had been profoundly compromised. The expected course of action would be for him to expose Mary's betrayal and to end the engagement with a public denunciation. His honor would be restored. He would be seen as an upright man. His family could arrange another marriage, and he could have his life back.

But then another dream replaced his broken one. As implausible as it might seem, this pregnancy has God's Spirit in it. There is more here than mere betrayal or lust or immorality or failure. There is blessing here as well. A recognition comes to him from deep in his unconscious. Joseph decides to stay with his betrothed. He will let go of his former dream and embrace a new one.

We all have dreams and fantasies about how things ought to be. We have expectations about how life should go, how people ought to behave, what our lives should be. These dreams form the boundaries of our values; they shape the vision of our lives.

Martin Luther King could inspire a whole generation toward an ideal of justice with the words, "I have a dream." But there is a danger in such dreams – a danger in the idealism that motivates us. One of the great commentators about living in community, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against unleashing the ruinous power of idealism. When we demand that others conform to our "wish dream" – whether we make that demand publicly or inwardly within our hearts – we often destroy relationships and community.

Julia Gatta is an Episcopal priest who now teaches at Sewanee. She visited with our clergy conference last month. When Julia and her husband moved back from Africa, where they had enjoyed an intense experience of natural community in an African village, they searched for a new place to belong. After a nationwide inquiry, they returned to a corner of rural, eastern Connecticut where they had already lived for almost twenty years. Julia became the part-time vicar of a little country congregation, moving into the vicarage next door to the church.

Three years into that life, she was disappointed. Her dreams for the parish seemed utterly crushed, her feelings hurt by a series of groundless suspicions and foolish misunderstandings. She began to make plans to leave. She would have moved, except, they had some unexpected financial troubles. She found she was forced to stay put. Even a half-time salary was better than the non-stipendiary work she had been considering. She resigned herself to working for the paycheck.

Being stuck where she was, Julia decided she might as well try to make the best of it. It occurred to her that she might try to love her parishioners as they actually were, not as she hoped they might be.

Strangely, things began to change. About a month after what Julia had thought was an entirely interior shift, an elderly parishioner remarked to her, "You seem to be more at peace." Julia says, "For reasons I cannot wholly explain, the atmosphere of our life together began to soften. When parishioners realized that I was not leaving and, in the end, did not even want to go, trust emerged." With time, they found they "could take

risks and make mistakes and still believe in each other's goodwill and forgiveness. Most of the time we simply got on with living the Christian life together.”<sup>1</sup>

St. John of the Cross said that living with other people is like stones in a bag rubbing each other to smoothness. People rub us the wrong way. They let us down. They don't live up to our expectations – our dreams and ideals. Often, our dreams and ideals have so much ego in them. When our dreams are shattered, something in our ego is threatened too.

Joseph finds his betrothed is pregnant. It is not just his dreams and ideals that are threatened, it is also his ego. When dreams get shattered, we lose something we have treasured. If we tend toward extroversion, we might react with anger. If we tend toward introversion, we might become depressed.

Below it all, there is grief. Something we treasured is lost. Joseph always thought he would grow up, they would get married, have a family, and live happily ever after, more or less. That dream died with Mary's announcement.

There is no way through grief except through it. Joseph had lost something precious to him. He was powerless to change it. Fortunately, he didn't act immediately. The conventional expectation would be for him to break off the engagement publicly and explain why. If he did that, he would retain his honor. His parents could arrange another engagement, and he would regain his dream. If Mary's family could shuffle her off somewhere far away, she might live in some lessened state of anonymity. In all likelihood, though, she would be killed for her betrayal, if not by her brothers, by someone else enforcing the morals and values of the community.

But Joseph didn't react; didn't act immediately. He stayed with the tension and the grief. He took time to grieve; to mourn. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

In the dark of night, something happened to him. In one sense, it changed nothing – Mary was still pregnant, and it wasn't his child – but actually it changed everything. Joseph looked again and could see God's Holy Spirit at work in a way previously unimaginable.

Sometimes when we have our illusions punctured, we can appreciate what is really there. Sometimes when we have our egos deflated, we discover gifts that were hidden from us. Sometimes when we surrender what ought to be, we can actually see and appreciate what is – the grace at work around us.

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<sup>1</sup>Julia Gatta, *The Nearness of God*, (NY: Morehouse Publ., 2010), p. 8

Sometimes dreams get broken. What we had dreamed for is taken from us. Sometimes dreams get broken, only to be re-dreamt.

Look. God is with us. Emmanuel.

Who would have dreamed it?