*Come Emmanuel and dream in us….in the name of God, the One who is with us. Amen*

Over the past few weeks of Advent we have been presented with scripture readings that urge us and caution us not to lose focus….. to be awake, be alert, don’t be distracted by unimportant things, because, we cannot know when the Master will come. John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness. We cannot, we must not rest, we have work to do, pathways to make straight for the Lord.

I have to say it is really nice to be here in this place with you today, to take a few hours away from the pressing business of preparations for the coming day of our Lord’s birth. But for right here, right now in this moment, there’s no shopping to do, no cookies to bake. Right now we simply need to just sing and pray and be with each other and let the Spirit rest inside us. Everybody take a big breath. One more…..ahhh.

Today we are presented with what is known as *Matthew’s infancy narrative*. It begins with little fanfare. Matthew is a pretty direct guy. “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way”. No messing around…we know what is happening and there is no mystery about Jesus’ identity, at least for us, the listeners.

There is a lot that is distinctive about how Matthew describes Jesus’ birth. There are definitely some aspects of *the Christmas story we tell* that appear to be missing. Can you name one? This is kind of like the children’s game with the two seemingly identical pictures side by side…”What is different between the two pictures?”

No traveling to Bethlehem; in Matthew, Joseph and Mary already live there

No manger, no livestock

No shepherds

No drummer boy - wait that’s the gospel according to Hallmark

Indeed the Christmas story we think we know so well is actually a collection of elements from both Matthew’s and Luke’s Gospels. Luke is the flowery one with songs and multiple layers of story woven together. Even the way that Matthew tells us about the announcement of Jesus’ birth is very different that what we know from Luke. For Matthew, the circumstances of Jesus’ birth appear cut and dried as we hear the matter-of-fact way he says, “*Mary bears a son and Joseph calls him Jesus”*.

Another very stark difference is that *Matthew focuses on Joseph*. Certainly, Mary is spoken about, but she has no words of her own this day, no song of obedience and rejoicing to sing. It’s Joseph’s turn to grapple with surprising, unexpected news. And what news it is!

Contrary to our own 24-7 news obsessed, beat-a-story-to-death-with-minutia world, we are told absolutely nothing about how Joseph learns about the baby Mary carries in her womb. How did Mary explain her condition? Did Mary tell Joseph about Gabriel’s visit to her? About how she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit causing this life to grow within her? Inquiring minds want to know!

This life-altering information had to be deeply, deeply troubling for Joseph. As we sit amidst the trappings of our modern Christmas celebrations, we forget that Jesus’ conception was a scandalous thing. The implications for both Joseph and Mary were socially devastating.

They were betrothed, engaged to be married, in a time and religious context when that meant a binding contract had been entered into in the presence of witnesses; a contract as binding as actually being married. By Jewish law, the scandal of Mary’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy put her in jeopardy of being labeled an adulteress, yielding at worst, a death by stoning, and at best, being shunned as a tainted woman, and at sure risk for a life of chronic poverty. Joseph also risks social rejection and loss of patronage as a craftsman in the community. So when Matthew speaks of Joseph being a man of righteousness, a man who follows the rules of his faith, Joseph is well justified in dismissing Mary from the marriage contract and saving face for himself.

But it’s clear that Joseph, despite certainly feeling terrible betrayal, is an honorable and caring man and has no intention of making Mary suffer public disgrace. He vows to have a quiet divorce, involving as few people as possible. And contrary to our recent messages to telling us stay alert and awake, Joseph takes to his bed to sleep. Well, Matthew doesn’t actually say Joseph hides under the covers, but wouldn’t you after receiving troubling, life-changing news, want to take a break from reality?

Dreams are funny things. I don’t know about you, but I have dreamed some really strange and perplexing things. I mean have you ever tried to put sense to a dream the morning after? A recurring one for me since being in seminary is that it’s Sunday morning, I haven’t read the scripture and I’m supposed to be preaching! God forbid!

Dreaming is important to our physical and emotional health. Dreams help us to process our experiences, consolidate our memories and store them in the cells of our nervous system. In fact, in experiments with folks whose dreaming is interrupted for several days in a row, the participants experience trouble remembering simple lists of words they were given to memorize, and they showed increased signs of irritability. When we dream it may help us to facilitate conflict resolution and put things into perspective. What we see and experience in dreaming may not necessarily be real in a flesh and bone sense, but the emotions and sensations attached to them are real to us.

Joseph’s angelic “Annunciation” as he dreamt was as real and transformative for him as Mary’s was for her. Matthew doesn’t say that in his “no frills” style of telling the story, but how could it be otherwise? This wounded but faithful, law-abiding man does a complete turnaround, taking Mary as his wife and caring for her and for the Son that is born to them. And he has the honor and awesome responsibility of naming him – Emmanuel – “God who is with us”.

It’s such a lovely picture, don’t you think? Just like a Christmas card. But don’t let us forget that God is working here through real people with real challenges, even as they live in faithful response to God’s love. Raising the child Jesus will not be an easy thing for them as parents to the Living God. Lutheran Theological Seminary president David Lose reminds us, *“God didn’t choose a fairy-tale princess to bear the savior, but rather an unwed peasant girl. He didn’t choose a wealthy success story to name and care for Jesus, but rather a man with his own doubts and questions who wanted to do the right thing but needed angelic guidance to accomplish it.”*

So this nativity story Matthew gives to us has no manger for a baby in swaddling cloths, no livestock quietly looking on. There are no shepherds standing in their fields awestruck by the songs of angels. But, this is the infancy narrative that holds the hopes and dreams of a people awaiting a Messiah. It contains the willing heart of a man whose soul is magnified by the Spirit of the Lord. It is a story of a binding obligation between God and the people God loved so much that he came to be with us. It is the story of the God who will never set us aside or dismiss us.

And just imagine, if God can work through ordinary people like Joseph and Mary to bring about such extraordinary things, then what dreams will God accomplish through us?

Amen