

“From Generation to Generation: We Can Choose a Better Way”  
Matthew 1:18-25

While co-teaching a confirmation class in the Presbyterian Church in Bend, Oregon, I took turns with another leader from the church to teach. There was one evening when it was Dave’s turn to teach on the Bible. He brought with him a complicated deep frier that was taken apart. The game was to have the youth try to put it back together without the instruction book. It turned out to be a major challenge and when we got to the point of giving up, Dave produced the manual of operations which made the task so much easier. The point of the exercise was to tell the youth that the Bible was the same way. It was given to us as a manual of operations so that we can live a good life. I admired Dave’s creativity, but I also worried about the simplistic message he ended up giving the youth. I wish the Bible and faith worked that way for us. Life has a lot of gray areas and unexpected twists and turns. The choices we make are not always simple or easy. The interesting thing about my friend Dave was that he himself had to face two very difficult situations in his life without easy answers. The first one was when his daughter had a brain aneurysm and ended up in a coma for a few weeks in the hospital before moving to more life and leaving behind young children. The second one was when Dave himself faced his own diagnosis of late-stage pancreatic cancer. It was profoundly moving to hear Dave’s testimony of faith at the end of his life about facing the unknown without easy answers, only the deep sense of connection to God in the midst of turmoil. In both cases, Dave had to navigate making tough decisions without using the simple maps or manuals of life. He did that with so much grace and grew tremendously in his trust.

I share this with you because I believe it connects to the message of faith we learn from Joseph, our ancestor in faith who had to rely on his inner guidance in the face of tremendous pressure and lack of clarity.

Last week we pondered how God is with us in times of fear through Mary’s story of accepting the challenge that was given to her by the angel. This was how the Gospel of Luke shared the story. In the Gospel of Matthew, we hear about another side of the story. This is about Joseph’s side of the story. Matthew is the Gospel which begins with the genealogy of Jesus through the line of Joseph. So from the beginning of the story, we know that Joseph had an important part of this story. Since Matthew tries to connect the story of Jesus to the Jewish stories of Israel, we see here a great connection to another dreamer by the name of Joseph. This was the son of Jacob who ended up being sold into slavery in Egypt but who eventually helped his people at a time of a famine. Joseph was someone who also had dreams and the ability to interpret their divine messages.

So in this story, we hear about a new Joseph who found himself in a tough spot as well. He was a righteous ordinary man who had followed what his family expected of him. He was engaged to a young woman and had stayed in the craftsmanship of his father. Everything about his life was predictable. He was not going on a big adventure, hit it big, or even trying to make waves. His life was ordinary, and his path seemed to be like that of other men in his community. But when Mary gave him the news of her pregnancy before they were officially married, his whole world was turned upside down. On the one hand,

he might have wanted to believe her, but on the other the story seemed like a way to cover up an unwanted pregnancy. He resolved to get himself out of the whole situation. But then more unexpected stuff happened in his life. Let's listen to his part of the story found in 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. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

It was not bad enough that Joseph had to deal with Mary's pregnancy before he had any marital relationships with her, he now had a dream telling him that his decision was wrong. We often skip over the fact that Joseph made his decision to believe Mary and then to become the stepfather of Jesus based on a dream. There was no manual of operations or step-by-step guide as to why and how to make his decisions. All he had to go on were the stories of his ancestors, like Joseph of Jacob and his dreams, his own dream, and his faith in his ability to hear the voice of God. Joseph was steeped in the faith of his ancestors that he knew how God spoke through dreams to previous generations. That was the gift that was given to him and he got to pass it onto others. The Jewish patterns of daily prayers and rituals in the home were so embedded in the hearts and minds of his people that even in moments of great despair, his mind and his heart were open to a message beyond his control and his understanding. The faith of his ancestor Joseph, the son of Jacob, became real for him when he received his own special dreams.

Today we are invited to follow in the same footsteps and to pay attention to our dreams and the quiet whispers of the Spirit in our hearts. Letting these inspirations shape our days and reality takes a lot of courage and a willingness to step into the future without easy or simple answers but with a focus on love to lead our way.

Since this is Christmas, I can't help but think of Charles Dickens' story, A Christmas Carol, in which we hear about the incredible transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge which was the result of a dream. Scrooge represented every human instinct for greed and seemed so impossible to redeem. Yet even a man like Scrooge was moved by the power of his dream to allow it to transform him from a miserly and cold-hearted man to a sharing person of care. The dream brought clarity to his life that was not possible through any other way.

I invite you to consider the story of our ancestor Joseph and how he paid attention to that which seemed illusive and unreal to listen to the voice of God and to allow it to transform him. How do you hear the voice of God in your life? How does God speak to you? Is it through dreams, whispers, signs, nudges, visions, or senses? If you don't know, maybe that is your prayer. Ask God to help you learn to listen and to pay attention. Life is always changing and always throwing unexpected situations at us. There is no manual that saves us. The challenge is to pay attention and to listen. There are many voices that capture our attention, but it takes practice and depth of spirit to listen to the voice of divine love that is planted in our hearts. We know that it is God's voice when it is leading us to greater love.

What are some of the ways God has spoken to or guided you?

We will end with a Bible verse from the story of Samuel's call in the temple, when he learned from Eli to respond to God's call by saying, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."—1 Samuel 3:10 Amen.