

A Narrative Sermon on Joseph of Nazareth.

Text: Matthew 1: 18-25

Rev. Sharon Smith

Accompanying a woman who was to become a public scandal, is an invitation I never dreamed I would receive.

And yet this was the door that was opening to me. Standing at its threshold it posed a daunting dilemma.

My family line had made extraordinary efforts to ensure genealogical purity. What shame would this uncover?

The shameful secrets of Tamar (raped by her half brother), Rahab (rumour has it that she made money by pleasuring married men), Ruth (came from Moab and seduced an upright Israelite elder), and of King David lying with Bathsheba wife Uriah? Things we only talked about behind closed doors. I didn't want my family to deal with a tainted record at the Jerusalem Temple. I knew shame, a collective shame for my people.

*Joseph and the Birth of Isaac in Matthew 1 by RICHARD J. ERICKSON
in Bulletin for Biblical Research*

I was always on my guard. A little frightened. I was not a man of words. I was a man of deep thought and to be honest of worry – anticipatory anxiety and fear. My days were already filled with tension. Hiding in my workshop, unable to face the cruel stares and rough jostles of the Roman Guards, unable to utter words of defence, I experienced such a sense of powerlessness.

Just last night, Mary had wept with me as she told me the news of her pregnancy. "Are you sure?" I had asked and asked and kept asking. A million moments, thoughts, feelings of embarrassment, blame, anger flashed through my head. I left hastily.

And now here I was left to my thoughts and rationalization. I loved the stillness of my workshop and of the repetitive sound of the sanding of wood. It was like the rhythm of breath during sleep. Here I could make a well-considered value-based decision.

I was experiencing inner dissonance.

- My name as a son of Abraham and son of David meant everything to me. My honour, my family's pride.
- And yet I felt disconnected from my heart. My centre, my vow, my word, my commitment before Yahweh.

The decision weighed on me. I needed to sleep. I made my way up to the flat roof of the building and lay down on my mat in the midday sun. As I drifted off the thought of leaving Mary was the stronger one. It seemed the most logical and made me feel empowered and somehow having a sense of control of life. Something rare in these times. I drifted off.

I was awakened by the sound of children playing – it sounded like a girl blowing a whistle while others shouted as they set their spinning tops in motion. As I came around, wiping my eyes what felt like a minute sleep. The sun was bright in my eyes. I felt my heart rate quicken.

I was remembering my dream. Like the web of a spider that becomes more visible in the light, my mind pieced together these words:

“Don’t be afraid”

“Take Mary as your Wife”

The energy from the dream woke me up instantly and I ran down the stairs into my workshop. Where I finished planing the olive wood for my next project.

The invitation was clear. I had come to believe that dreams are one tool for decision making. A discernable guidance that tapped into the depths of my soul in a personal and trustworthy way. Dreams, visions, hunches, intuitions, coincidences, impressions, and visitations formed a tapestry of meaning for me. It’s embarrassing to talk about and I don’t often share it, but it is undeniably real for me. It is confirmation of a deeper knowing. It is like a light shines onto the self-deception of logic that makes it all about strength and power and me.

I knew the landscape well, I knew the signs.

(Brother Curtis Almquist, SSJE on Revelation)

I had learnt to trust my dreams like one of the tools in my workshop that exposes the real grain of the wood. Especially when looked at from all the angles. Somehow being with Mary would hold my status as a Son of David more fully. Bringing those pieces together was all I needed to know.

No longer was the question, what should I do. It was now, could I do it?

My deliberations had taken up most of the day, and I knew that Mary was eating her heart out, waiting for my decision. I couldn’t leave her in that state. I couldn’t leave her. I couldn’t leave her.

I bent down on the sawdust floor and I whispered from the very ground of my being:

“let it be with me according to your word”.

Joseph a man, an archetype of right relatedness, though shrouded in silence, inspires silence.

Entrusted not to speak, but to witness mystery.

Entrusted to keep respect people and keep them safe.

Entrusted to trust his deep inner promptings in spite of his fear.

Joseph of Nazareth, Federico Suarez

And with St Teresa of Avila, I commend him to you:

She writes: "Those who give themselves to prayer should in a special manner have always a devotion to St. Joseph; for I know not how any man can think of [Mary], during the time that she suffered so much with the Infant Jesus, without giving thanks to St. Joseph for the services he rendered them then. They who cannot find anyone to teach them how to pray, let them take this glorious Saint for their master, and they will not wander out of the way."

St Teresa of Avila, Life, chapter 6.