

This is a season of dreaming, isn't it? That magical time of year when the miracle of Christmas assures us that dreams can come true. We hear it everywhere... I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams... I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" - I think we have that one covered!... "The children were nestled all snug in their beds while visions of sugarplums danced in their heads" – more likely visions of new toys and the latest tech gadgets these days, but we know that many of those dreams will come true, at least for our kids ... We are blessed to live in a place where dreams do often come true. Not everyone is so lucky. I wonder what the children in Ukraine are dreaming of, or those in Somalia, or Iran, or even those living in a shelter in downtown Ottawa or any city across our own country. Parents all around the world are dreaming of safe homes and nutritious food, of the end to violence, of happy childhoods for their sons and daughters... Peace, hope, joy, and love – all the important gifts of Christmas. But for some, life is so terrifying right now that they can't even dream. They are just too afraid.

Isaiah understood this. In our reading today, he is addressing a people who are terrified. They are being attacked by powerful military forces. To make matters worse, one of Israel's own provinces has joined with the enemy to fight them. It has become a war where brothers fight against brothers, where the threat is not only from an outside super power but from your own kin and neighbour. In the passage leading to the one we heard today; King Ahaz and his people are "shaking like trees in a powerful wind storm." They aren't dreaming... they are too terrified to dream. They believe the end for them is near. How can you dream in a situation like this?

God says, "Don't be afraid. It's going to be alright; life will go on, I promise. I am here. I love you. If you need a sign, I'm ready to give you one, just ask." But this just adds to Ahaz's terror. "Oh no! I will not put God to the test! It's against the rules!" He is so afraid that he can't even trust God. He thinks he is being set up for more horror, the horror of the vengeance of the very power that is trying to calm his fear.

So, Isaiah steps in. "Snap out of it! You aren't testing God; God is trying to show you that this will pass and life will continue. God isn't testing your adherence to the rules. God is trying to make you see that the signs of life, the signs of the future, are all around you."

"Look!" says Isaiah, "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel." Now that's a familiar verse, isn't it!

Was Isaiah foretelling the birth of Jesus? From our place thousands of years after this proclamation, it sure seems so. We hear this and understand. Immanuel, God with us – has always been with us and always will. God will do anything to help us, even come to the world as a human baby to help us make the dream of heaven on earth be fulfilled. It's beautiful. It's comforting. It's a message we need to hear today, in these times of fear and worry.

But I wonder... even if this was a prediction, would it have been comforting for the people gathered that day, huddled in terror of a powerful approaching army? Imagine the assembly

gathered that day. Those folks won't be around to see this holy child be born. They need comfort now. They need assurance that life will continue tomorrow and the next day...

"Look!" says Isaiah, "the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel."

"Look!" the sign they needed was right there in their midst – a young woman, pregnant – some scholars believe it was Isaiah's own wife he pointed to – a sure sign that life continues, even in times like this. And Isaiah says this child will be named "God with Us" – not God coming in several hundred years, but now, imminently – the sign that God wants Ahaz and his people to see. The imminent birth of a baby is a sign that life continues, life created through love, a sign of hope for the future.

And Isaiah continues:

"He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted."

Curds and honey... some translations say "butter and honey". Why would Isaiah tell them what this child would eat? Think about it... in a time of raging war, it's not likely that cows would be peacefully grazing in pastures. It's not likely that people would have the luxury of time to turn fresh milk into curds or butter or to gather honey from the hives. Curds and honey are peace time foods. And, Isaiah assures them that this peaceful scene will happen before the child reaches the age where he can make conscious choices between good and evil.

This woman is carrying a child; this baby will be born soon, and within a few years this land will be in a time of peace once more. The world is not about to end. The signs of new life are here in our midst. Don't be afraid, hang in there and remember "Immanuel" - God with us – now and always. Words of comfort in a terrifying time. Perhaps words that would allow the people to dream once more.

Some 700 years later, another young woman is visited by an angel, a messenger from God, who tells her that she will soon bear a child. She is, at first, confused and concerned, but soon knows this is an opportunity to further God's plan for creation, to work toward God's dream of a better world. She is willing to accept the responsibility that God has placed on her, even though it will certainly complicate her life.

Today we read about one of those complications – finding herself pregnant, engaged but not yet married. Her betrothed, Joseph, reacts with disbelief, and fear of what this will do to this young woman he loves. What can he do? The laws say he must end their engagement. The laws say that if he publicly announces that she is pregnant out of wedlock she will be condemned by the community and even stoned. He is a righteous man, we are told. He wants to do the right

thing and yet, he still wants to protect her. The only solution he can think of is to divorce her privately and hope it will be ok.

I can't imagine how he must have felt upon hearing this news from Mary – like his world had been turned upside down... confused, betrayed, afraid of what will happen to them all...

An angel of God appears to him in a dream. No direct visitation for Joseph. I can't imagine he was having a peaceful sleep that night but, somehow, he dreams, and this dream helps him see another way forward.

We can think of what Joseph heard in this dream as a mystical visitation and that is beautiful and comforting. In a time of crisis, who wouldn't want a clear message from God? The messages he receives in this dream are many:

Don't be afraid

This child Mary carries is a child of God.

This child will be named Jesus, a name that means "God saves".

This child is being sent to make a difference in the world.

Remember what Isaiah told your ancestors - "God is with us".

As a fully human man, Joseph was searching for a different way forward, a way that would keep everyone safe and yet still conform to God's expectations of him. Until he slept, he could see no way that this could happen, no choice that could possibly lead to a good outcome for himself, the woman he loved, and this innocent baby who has complicated everything. But in this dream, another path is revealed. Seen in very human terms, the messages still have powerful meaning:

Remember what Isaiah told your ancestors – "God is with us", God is with you now.

This child Mary carries can be the one who makes the difference the world needs.

This child will carry the name Jesus "God saves" as a reminder that this is God's will.

This child is a child of God.

... and you, Joseph, have a part to play in making this happen...

Don't be afraid.

Don't be so concerned with what the world sees as proper – do what you need to do to protect Mary and this child she bears, this child who can change the world. Do what you need to do to ensure that the possibility and promise this child holds can be fulfilled. You and Mary have been given an opportunity – a God-given opportunity – to raise the child who can show the path of making God's dream for this world come true.

I wondered as I read the advent stories this year why some, like Mary, receive a direct message from a visiting angel, but Joseph hears the message that will change his course of action in a dream...

It might have something to do, I think with that state of fear. Mary heard that she was going to bear a child and, even though it wasn't the best time for this to happen, she accepted it as a gift from God – God who she trusted – and so she celebrated. "My soul magnifies the Lord!" she sings, "God has blessed me!"

Joseph, however, doesn't see the blessing – not at first anyway. He sees pain and heartache and disappointment. He sees his carefully planned life with the woman he loves being blown away. This isn't how it was supposed to be. He is afraid of what is about to happen and, no matter how he tries to find a happy solution, even the best he can imagine still comes up short. No one is coming out of this unhurt.

In his state of stress, he sleeps.

When I was young, a minister once talked about why on earth the disciples would sleep in the garden of Gethsemane, just when Jesus needed them most. "It was the sleep of escape," he said. "Sometimes when reality is just too much to handle right now, our bodies protect us by putting us to sleep." I think, perhaps this is exactly what happened to Joseph. This news that was turning his world upside down was just more than he could handle right then. His mind was racing with worry and fear about the things that were about to happen, the worst-case scenarios playing over and over in his head. He needed sleep to calm that racing brain, to allow it to reset and think clearly, to give it a chance to see a different path forward, a new way of making sense of what was happening to them all – Mary, the baby, and himself. He woke with a whole new perspective. Mary was still the devout, faithful woman he loved, the woman who loved him. A baby is the very incarnation of hope for the future, a baby's very existence assures us of the potential for a better future. How could he turn his back on them? How could he deny that promise of a fresh new tomorrow?

Sometimes, I think, a person needs more than a message from God... sometimes a person needs a chance to dream, a chance to picture the world the way it was meant to be, a chance to recognize one's own part in making that dream become reality.

This Christmas, let's remember that dreams are more than wishes. Dreams are not something a jolly elf with a magic sleigh pulled by reindeer, or even a loving, omnipotent God, can make come true. Those, I think, are wishes. Dreams are the opportunity to picture a brighter future;

dreams give us a chance to find our part in making that vision a reality. This Christmas, let us dream with Joseph, putting aside our fears and following the path to a better tomorrow, remembering that Immanuel means “God with us”, and trusting that God will *always* be with us to help us face the obstacles that threaten to hold us back. Let’s keep our eyes on the promise of a better time, a peaceful time when our children and all children will feast on butter and honey. Amen.