

2ChristmasC2016
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee
January 3, 2016 (first Sunday as Rector)

In the name of the Father + and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

My best friend lived in Kenya for a year and brought me back a Nativity set as a souvenir. It's carved of gorgeous, deep brown, almost black, hardwood. The figures stand around the manger, stately and expectant—cows, sheep, wise men, shepherds and the Holy Family. I look forward to opening it when Travis and I get out the Christmas decorations every year. The only problem is this: I can never tell which of the figurines is supposed to be Joseph. The carvings are all so stylized that the characters look similar to one another. So, each year, I simply nominate one of the figures to be Mary's husband. I'm fairly certain that in the last ten years, every figure in that set has played Joseph at one time or another.

I think we can all agree that, generally speaking, Joseph gets a bit of a bum rap in the Christmas story. Mary, the angels, even the shepherds watching their flocks by night—all are wonderfully dramatic figures. But Joseph doesn't seem to do much. In most Christmas pageants, he speaks two lines at best. The Nativity can seem like a conversation between God and Mary with Joseph sidelined. Today's Gospel story finally gives Joseph his time in the spotlight.

In this morning's Gospel, we heard that, "...an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you." Joseph finally gets to be a hero.

This morning's villain is Herod, king of Judea and Roman sympathizer. Herod orders his guards to search for the baby Jesus and kill him. You might remember that this Herod is the same one who ordered the killing of all the Judean male children in anticipation of Jesus' birth and the same Herod who would later have one of his wives murdered. Villain indeed.

Joseph hears the warning about Herod from God in the form of a dream, and he immediately takes his family away to safety, ensuring that the baby Jesus would one day grow up to heal the sick, feed the poor, preach the Sermon on the Mount and share bread and wine with his friends. Herod is married to power, afraid for his position and willing to kill to maintain his regime. Joseph demonstrates the opposing virtues: fidelity to God, wisdom, loving-kindness and the good sense to protect that which is precious.

Even though it's kind of funny each year that I can't tell which of the figures in my Nativity set is supposed to be Joseph, it's also kind of beautiful—the idea that anyone might be chosen to be a Joseph. Those virtues that inhabit Joseph—fidelity to God, wisdom, loving-kindness and good sense—those are our virtues too. Anyone might be chosen to receive a dream from God. Indeed, I think divine dreams are more common than we might think.

What are you dreaming about right now? What kinds of premonitions are you receiving from on high? Maybe your dreams are about your own life, your family, your work? Maybe you have a dream for St. Mark's Episcopal Church? Maybe you have a warning for the people of Milwaukee? What kind of action is God calling this group of people to right now? Where should we be paying attention?

When I look out at this congregation, I see many Josephs—I see faithful people who are ready and able to dream. I see people eager to attend to what God is saying and to act decisively. I see people able to notice and name the Herods of the world.

I know many of you are weary of being in a long transition time between Rectors. I know many of you are scared that attendance is not as high as we might like it to be. I also know that many churches all over the country are concerned and even frightened about what it means to be a community of faith in an increasingly post-Christian world. What will happen to our way of life? Our way of faith? Our worship and music?

Well, I can't say that I have all the answers. But I can point us to a God who provides the dreams we need right when we need them. I'm guessing the dream we receive won't be to flee to Egypt—we are in Wisconsin after all. But maybe our dream is to open our doors to our neighbors so that everyone in this whole city knows they are welcome here. Maybe our dream is to double our efforts to make our children and youth a priority so that they are raised into the full stature of Christ in this wonderful parish family. Maybe our dream is to use this gorgeous building and our beautiful music program to be a haven and a solace for those people who are reeling from the frenetic pace of this crazy, modern life. Maybe our dream is to feed the poor. Maybe our dream is to change the world. I don't know what our dream is yet. I have a lot of listening to do. It's only my first day of work, so it might take a little while. But I know it will have something to do with justice, with beauty, with service, with breaking bread, and with fidelity to Joseph's God--the God of dreams.

In the end, it doesn't matter which of the figures is supposed to be Joseph. What matters is that we are attentive to the God who speaks to us, who reveals Godself to us. Or, put another way, we are ALL supposed to be Joseph.

So, my new friends, listen to your dreams. And in these weeks and months to come, if you have a dream for this parish, this neighborhood or this city, please tell me. If you're feeling a pull or a call from God to act decisively about something, I want to know about it. The Holy Spirit has a way of whispering to us, and mighty things can happen when we pay attention. Washed in our common Baptism and fed with the Bread and Wine at this table, there is no dream beyond us. So, consider this an open invitation to share your dreams with me and with each other, if you're willing. All we need is a little grace from God and a little courage, and we can do absolutely anything. God will provide it all, in abundance. Every one of us is a saint. Every one of us is a Joseph. So dream big. Amen.

