Hold Fast to Dreams

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

While we are making plans for Christmas, life happens, and we hold on to the love of Christmas to sustain us in challenging times.

- Ernie Stallworth broke his neck in a car accident and has been in intensive care for a couple of weeks.
- Many people are facing significant medical challenges.
- Annaliese Heinig, who grew up in this church, is missing and her family grieves.
- People who are homeless are still cold and hungry, and we had a Tedford service here last evening.
- Some folk in our congregation know and are supporting the woman who was assaulted in Bath last week.
- The president of our country was impeached.

That is to name just some of the life that has been happening. And so, we gather to hold fast to the love of Christmas. About 2,000 years ago Jesus of Nazareth was born. That event is a Mystery (with a capital M) that people have been pondering ever since.

Of our four gospels only two (Luke and Matthew) tell Christmas stories as we think of them. Luke tells the story through Mary’s eyes and in last week’s choral Magnificat we heard Mary’s song which resonates with Hannah’s song from Jewish heritage.

Matthew, from whom we will hear today, tells the story from the perspective of Joseph and the dreams he experiences. His story resonates with the Joseph of the amazing technicolor dreamcoat of Jewish heritage.

The Bible makes no attempt to give us a definitive account of what “really happened” at Christmas; for the Bible approaches truth as being deeper than history itself.

SERMON

Today I’m going to begin and end with a poem by Langston Hughes.

Hold Fast to Dreams
for if dreams die
Life is a
Broken Winged Bird
that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams. What are you dreaming these days? I suspect Christmas was beyond Mary and Joseph’s wildest dreams. Imagine Mary and Joseph after their angel visitations. Maybe Mary sent Joseph a text saying. Joseph, we need to talk. Ah yes! God was asking a lot from both of them.

In Barbara Robinson’s Best Christmas Pageant Ever, the preacher’s son, Elmer, who is always forced to play Joseph
(because no one else will), offers to pay one of the other boys to be Joseph, with no luck. Who wants a part where, as Elmer says, you don’t move and don’t say anything? Why do we do that to Joseph? Make him stand still and be silent.

Christmas Cards are arriving. You probably have received at least one that has Madonna and child on the front. Maybe the holy family. But, have you ever received one that is just Joseph and Jesus? I’ve only found one over the years. The image is of a young Jesus riding high on Joseph’s back, holding on tight. Both their heads are aglow and their faces are snuggled together. Inside it says,

\[
\text{The Dream of God shall be carried} \\
\text{In strong hearts and gentle hands.}
\]

(art by Sr. Richard Mehren, 20th century, card printed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of LaGrange.)

Joseph of Nazareth lived in a culture that kept God mostly up on the mountaintop – to be feared and revered – from a safe distance. But the angel of the Lord came to Joseph right where he was – in a dream, while he slept – and gave him the astonishing news that God was right in the midst of his family. The just and right thing for him to do was to be Jesus’ father.

Once when I asked a group of young people, What is a father? One of them said this, A father accepts responsibility for his children, whether they are biologically his or not; and he cares for his children and isn’t afraid to show it.

Joseph arises from the dream and holds fast to God’s dreams. He holds fast to Jesus’ life so that God’s dreams may take hold in him. What more could God ask for from a parent?

My father was an English teacher for almost 40 years. He was known to scatter his conversation with quotes and poems – some of which my brothers and I didn’t even realize until we got older. I can’t say as children that we always (or ever) expressed appreciation for this exposure, but I have come to value it greatly. Just because your children dis you doesn’t mean what you are doing isn’t important.

Over the years, one of those poems that has held me fast and moved me closer to God’s dreams is called Outwitted, by Edwin Markham.

\[
\text{He drew a circle that shut me out} \\
\text{- Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout} \\
\text{But Love and I had the wit to win} \\
\text{We drew a circle that took him in.}
\]

It’s both puzzling and distressing how easy it is for us to draw circles and raise walls that separate us one from the other. Yet the good news of Christmas is that the God of Love, working through Mary and Joseph, drew a circle in Jesus that was big enough to take us all in.

My father was also a politician in the Maine state legislature. We often didn’t agree on political matters, but he was OK with that because he taught his children to think for themselves. He also taught us to be respectful of other people and the things that brought them to their perspectives. He believed in democracy.

At the moment, at some levels of government in our country we are having a hard time holding fast to the dream of democracy, where people agree to work together for the common good. This is a
dream worth holding fast to. As the going gets tough, may we be tough enough to keep going in the direction of justice and peace.

Christmas draws us away from our usual distractions and calls us to ponder the deeper mysteries of life and love. Such ponderings can be unsettling; that’s why the angel always says, “Be not afraid.” These words are both comfort and a call to awareness. We need comfort because you can be pretty sure that what the angel has to say will leave us shaking in our boots. But angels also remind us that we need to pay attention. Fear generally keeps us shut down, but angels call us to a radical awareness.

As Joseph learned, invariably God is much closer than we think. So what dream is God asking you to hold fast to today?

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_for if dreams die_
_Life is a_
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_that cannot fly._

Langston Hughes