

## Dreams of Home

In the Christmas season we celebrate what theologians like to call the mystery of the incarnation, the great miracle that God became human flesh and made his home among us. And you don't get much more mysterious and elusive than this part of the Christmas story. This is the God of dreams and magi and messenger angels - all so unfamiliar to our modern ears. The magi were some sort of wise men, likely eastern astrologers following the signs in the stars that God had set out in creation to tell the story of the Christ child. They left home to find hope, and they discovered it in the small baby, and they left forever changed. I suppose if you could read the story of God's plan in the physicality of the stars, then seeing God in the form of a material human baby would not seem so strange. Recognizing the divine in the ordinary was what they were all about anyway, so maybe the mystery was slightly less mysterious to them. After worshipping at the foot of baby Jesus, they went back to their homes, but I'm sure home would never be the same for them because they were somehow different, having beheld God in the flesh with their own eyes.

Then an angel comes to Joseph to tell him to take his young family and flee to Egypt to escape Herod's jealous rage. Now if you will remember, Joseph's people had not had such a good run of luck in Egypt in the past, so that must have seemed like an odd place to seek sanctuary; but who questions an angel, so Joseph took Mary and Jesus and escaped to Egypt. I suppose that once he had swallowed the idea that his virgin wife had just given birth to a God-child, the unexplained and mysterious just took on a slightly different scope and meaning to him. He not only had his family, but he had God with him, and he could make his home even in the land of bondage if that is where God called him.

Then once again he had a dream that it was time to bring his family back to their native land. But when he heard that Herod's wrathful son was ruling in his place, he decided he couldn't risk going to Judea. So he went down to where the outcasts were - the little town of Nazareth, and set up there, where no one would look for them because no one cared about what went on there. In those days, Nazareth was considered a no account backwater. Maybe you will remember the incident in the early days of Jesus' ministry when the Philip is trying to get Nathanael to come and be a disciple, he tells him about the great teacher and miracle worker who he believes is the long-promised messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and Nathanael asks with a tone of shocked disdain, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" But that is precisely where God had called him to make his home, and so Joseph decided again that home would be where God led him. Joseph came to realize that the mysterious God of dreams and visions, of starry signs and messenger angels, was also the God who was so near that he could touch him, and hold him in his arms; being with him is what made home

We have a saying in our culture that "home is where the heart is," but for Joseph, home was where God met him, where God was present with him, where his dream of home and family met God's dream for the future. In that place he could rest and be truly prosperous in the most important sense - serving God and finding his purpose. If we have been paying attention to the

story, it should come as no surprise that the God who chose to be incarnate through an insignificant peasant girl betrothed to a carpenter, the God who was born in a feeding trough and worshipped by scraggly shepherds, would choose to make his home in the unsavory town of Nazareth known for nothing good. This was the only place to look for the God of redemption. It's like he was saying from the start - I am the God who brings together kings and shepherds, who can redeem even the place of slavery and suffering, who will make the castoff town important and restore its reputation. These were the first steps toward Joseph understanding what it meant to have God among us, and the first stages of Jesus becoming the Christ who would redeem the world. This was the place where Joseph's dream of home and family met God's dream for what home and family could be if they were infused with the fullness of God's presence restoring the world.

It is here that we can find in this mysterious story something about God's dream for us, for creating home and recognizing God's presence among us in the unlikeliest, most unexpected, of places. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a book I love entitled *God Has a Dream*. In it he writes powerfully about God's dream for humanity and our world, and how we can actively work to attain it. He writes, "It is through weakness and vulnerability that most of us learn empathy and compassion and discover our soul." In the story of God, the messiah needed to grow up in the despised town of Nazareth so that he could have empathy for the outcast and redeem the things thought to be worthless, so that he could embody the mysterious God who loves not the great but the lowly, who chooses not the powerful but the needy. And if we want to realize God's dream among us, we will learn to become at home in similar places, because that is where we find God is making his earthly dwelling.

I'm sure Joseph thought of Egypt as a hopeless place. He already knew the story of suffering and slavery that came out of there. 'Don't go back to Egypt' was a cautionary saying in their culture. But it became a place of safety and salvation for his family. We all have similar spaces in our lives - relationships so broken we cannot imagine reconciliation, places so despised we dare not dream of restoration, situations so chaotic we cannot envision peace and resolution in them. God is looking to be incarnate in just such spaces, to make a home where we wouldn't dream so that the dream of the incarnate God could become a tangible reality, so that redemption could have a face that we recognize, a story that we call our own, a home where dreams seem less far-fetched and more like a glimpse of heaven breaking in.

In that same book, Archbishop Tutu goes on to write, "There is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now--in our personal lives... Indeed, God is transforming the world now--through us--because God loves us." God is still making his home among us, and just like the original Christmas story, it is not exactly as we would have pictured, or maybe even the way we would have hoped, and the route is often a long and circuitous one. That is simply part of the mystery of the incarnation - God appears where we wouldn't expect and leads us where we would prefer not to go. But in the end of the journey, we find that God has made a home among us, and it is wonderful indeed.

God is still planting dreams of home deep inside of us. Places of belonging and peace. Places where we can grow to become who God created us to be. But the path there might be the long route, because, as Tutu says, "it is through weakness and vulnerability that most of us learn

empathy and compassion and discover our soul." And when we arrive it might not look quite like we had imagined. But what is more important is whether we can discover the face of God there when we look at those we discounted and discarded, whether we are willing to allow God's dream of restoration and renewal to be our dream. In the Christmas season we are to be caught up with the idea that God's dream is to make a home among us, in our hearts, which might be the unlikeliest home of all. But let's prepare him room, and let the mystery of God incarnate light our souls. Amen.