

ANGELS IN DREAMS
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Have you ever seen an angel? I have never seen an angel, but when I asked that question to one of my New Testament classes at Alice Lloyd, I was surprised when one young lady said matter of factly, "Yes, I've seen an angel." She proceeded to tell us that when she was a young girl, she saw a beautiful bright angel standing beside her mother. Later she said a close relative died, and she was comforted by the presence of that angel that she had seen. Again, a friend of mine told me about taking his son to a baseball game where they were sitting near the top deck. His little son crawled under the seat and fell about twenty or thirty feet onto a concrete floor below; and he ran frantically down to get him, expecting the worst, only to find him in the arms of a man holding him, who said, "Your son is just fine." My friend said that the man handed his son to him, and then just disappeared. "I truly believe that man was one of God's Guardian angels," said my friend.

But Here in Matthew is a different angel story with a different twist. The angelic visits came to Joseph only in dreams. So we have two interesting things-- angels in dreams. Let us look at this Christmas story about Angels in Joseph's Dreams. We find the story in Matthew 1:18-21:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. ¹⁹ Then Joseph, her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. ²⁰ But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. ²¹ And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

ANGEL APPEARED IN A STRANGE PLACE. The first thing we notice is that the angel appeared to Joseph in a strange place, in a dream. This occurs four times – first when he is confronted with the hardest decision in his young life. Mary, to whom he is engaged and soon to marry is pregnant, and he is brokenhearted, no doubt, about the prospect of what will happen to her if her condition is made public. According to the Law of Moses she is supposed to be stoned in a public place, and he, Joseph, will be permitted to cast the first stone. We find Joseph musing and worrying about the situation with the one he obviously cares about very much indeed. The Bible says that he thought about Mary's situation and decided to put her away privately instead of putting her to public shame; and although he went to bed sorrowful, still, perhaps, for the first time in days he found some peace in sleeping. During that time of sleep he was visited by an angel. And the angel said to him, 'Fear not to take Mary as your wife, for that which is in her was conceived of the Holy Ghost.' Then the angel assured Joseph that this child was the long promised Messiah, the Son of God.

Joseph obeyed the angel dream and married Mary. The child was born. Then when Jesus was just a little older wise men from the east visited Him and brought wonderful gifts. But they

visited Herod first; and fearing for his throne, Herod started searching for Jesus to kill Him. Then the angel appeared a second time in a dream, telling Joseph to take the family to Egypt. Then again, when Herod had died the angel appeared a third time in another dream and told Joseph to return to Israel, and Joseph obeyed. But, hearing that Archaelus reigned in his Father's place, Joseph was again worried, and was again warned, probably by the angel a fourth time in a dream to go to Nazareth, a little mountain town, thereby fulfilling Scripture, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'

What a strange place to appear, in a dream. In the other instances in the Christmas Story angels appear in their glorious persons to the people to whom they come with a divine message, yet to Joseph the angel appears in dreams. But that is the nature of angels in Scripture: they come with a message. In fact the word for angel in Greek is *ho angelos*, or messenger. Therefore, we must assume that God works in different ways with different persons. He can and does come to some in dreams, for that is the way in which they can most easily understand what God is trying to tell them, and, seeing some revelation of God in a dream makes such a lasting impression to them that they know it is of God. Three times for sure, and probably four times, the angel visits Joseph in his dreams.

However, since an angel is a messenger of God, whoever brings you a message from God is your angel – God's messenger to you.

ANGEL APPEARED WITH A STRANGE MESSAGE. But not only was the angel in a strange place, the angel came with a strange message, so strange, in fact, that it could have come only from God, and could not have been made up or even imagined by Joseph.

Matthew 1:20-21

²⁰ But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. ²¹ And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

The angel tells Joseph, first of all, not to be afraid to take Mary to be his wife. And then the angel says a thing that must have seemed quite strange to Joseph: 'that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.' Doubtless Joseph must have been like others of his day and like those Gentiles in Ephesus who said, in effect, 'We don't know even what the Holy Ghost is.' What in the world was the angel saying, and what does he mean, 'Conceived of the Holy Ghost'? But to Joseph's credit, he did what the angel told him to do, even though he did not fully understand the message. Then Joseph was told the name the babe would have, Jesus, which means Savior and Deliverer, for he would save his people from their sins.

It was a strange message, to be sure, a message he did not fully understand, a message that he could not understand until quite a bit later. But I believe that, before he died, he knew all about the virgin birth, he knew who the Holy Ghost was, he knew that Jesus was Divine, and he knew that Jesus was Savior and Messiah and Lord, and all those other theological truths that were inherent in the message of the angel. He did the most important thing and took Mary as his wife, even though she was pregnant, and he was not the father of her child.

In taking Mary as his wife on the authority of an angel in a dream, he was showing great faith, and his faith was rewarded. That surely is an example for us. There are many things we do not understand about the Bible and about life, many truths too deep for our simple human minds; but God expects us to do the things first that we do understand and the things that we don't understand will work out later. I don't know how heaven looks and what it will be like there, or even for certain who is there; but I do know how to get there, and that is by repentance for sin and faith in Jesus Christ as my personal Savior. Emily Dickinson wrote:

I never saw a moor;
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.
I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.

Most of us are not as certain as she seemed to be in her beautiful poem.

I am sure that our message of repentance and faith are strange messages to some people – maybe to some of you. And others of you may be concerned and confused and bewildered about many theological terms that we preachers use. But one thing is certain, you know that you have done things in your life that you are sorry for doing, and sometimes you must feel extremely guilty about doing them, and you must wonder if there is some way that such things can be forgiven, reversed, and forgotten. There is a way!. If you will ask God to forgive your sins, if you will trust the death of Jesus Christ as payment for your sins, if you will allow Jesus Himself to come into your heart, then you can be totally free from the guilt and the sorrow and the heaviness of spirit that those old sins have caused, and still cause you daily.

Joseph acted on that which the angel told him, not knowing the full importance or the full meaning of this strange message that the angel in his dream had given to him, not understanding but knowing that he must do what the angel said. The words of the 4 Fold Gospel Commentary remind us of this fact as well: "The suffering of both Mary and Joseph must have been very extreme at this time – one being forced to suspect the chief object of his affections, and the other being compelled to rest under the unjust suspicions of loved ones, because of a condition which God alone could explain." Sometimes, there is no explanation. That is the time for faith.

The angel appeared in a strange place with a strange message. Then, when there was a great threat to the life of this virgin born child, the angel in the dream visited Joseph, and the ANGEL SENT JOSEPH TO A STRANGE COUNTRY.

Matthew 2:13

¹³ And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

We often associate the coming of the Magi with the birth of Jesus, but Barclay, the New Testament scholar, says that by the time they brought their gifts for baby Jesus, He might have been around 3 years old. However, the threat of a new king being born, as suggested by the Eastern Magi, whatever his age, was more than the vicious King Herod was willing to allow to pass notice. He was determined to find and to destroy any man, woman or child who was a threat to his royal power. And when the Magi were warned to go home by another route, Herod was so furious that he slew all the male children in the area of Bethlehem two years old and under, 'Rachel weeping for her children and they were not.'

Joseph was again faithful to the angel in the dream and took the young child and His mother and fled to Egypt, a refugee family seeking safety in the land of Israel's captivity, the land of the Pharaohs. But why did God send them to this strange country? Why Egypt? The obvious first reason was safety. Joseph was warned in a dream that there was imminent danger. So they packed what they could carry and fled to Egypt.

Another reason for Egypt was that it symbolized the world mission field where the Gospel of this Jesus would one day be preached, the land of the Gentiles for whom this Jesus would die; and even today in Egypt there are many devoted followers of the Lord Jesus Christ among the Coptic Christians, and other churches and denominations. Jesus was visiting His mission field.

Again, the Bible tells us a reason for this strange country. Looking back at His sojourn there, the Gospel writers concluded it was a fulfillment of the prophecy, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son." An angel in a dream told Joseph what he must do to protect his family, and in his doing so, Joseph fulfilled prophecy.

And while we may never have an angel visit us in a dream, this story of Joseph reminds us that we also need to listen to the voice of God whenever and however that voice may come to us. Whenever God says "Arise and go" we must do as He says. Moreover, He said in the great commission to His post-resurrection church, "Go Ye therefore."

The angel in a dream appeared to Joseph two final times in the Christmas story in Matthew 2:19-22

¹⁹ But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, ²⁰ Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life. ²¹ And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee: ²³ And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene. So, the angel in a dream appears twice more, and the angel sent Joseph back to His Familiar land, Israel; but not to Judea, where Christ was born.

Instead the Angel sent Joseph back to a strange community, to Nazareth. Doubtless, Mary and Joseph would have preferred to go back to the familiar, to their home town of Bethlehem where they met and grew up; where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was buried; and where

the beautiful love story of Ruth and Boaz took place. Moreover, in Bethlehem, David, Israel's greatest king, was born, the great grandson of Ruth and Boaz. The historic town of Bethlehem boasted itself as the hometown of these famous citizens. Further, Bethlehem was on the main road between Egypt and Israel, and was 6 miles southwest of Jerusalem, the Holy City, the Golden City, the Temple City of the Hebrews, and everyone wanted to live near Jerusalem, the City of Peace, the City of God. Bethlehem was such a place, near Jerusalem, near the great festivals, some of which required yearly attendance by all Jewish males.

The name Bethlehem meant literally 'house of bread,' symbolic, no doubt, of God's blessing of prosperity. What a thrill it would be to both Joseph and Mary to come back to their beloved hometown to raise their family. Mary would show her young son to all her friends and relatives; and with his own carpenter's tools and skill and his own strong hands, Joseph would build them a dwelling there, among their own, and would build his carpenter's shop nearby where he would train Jesus, the oldest child, to be his helper and his apprentice: and they would live happily ever after.

But no! It didn't work out as they planned, for Archalaeus was nearly as bloodthirsty as his evil father, and he too would have demanded their lives. No, it was not God's will to live in Bethlehem! Even this, perhaps, they could not understand; but Joseph listened to the angel, went to the hill country in the Western Highlands, and built his home and his carpenter's shop, and his family, there, in the small village of Nazareth. Looking back, Matthew saw the providential working of God in prophesy, "He shall be called a Nazarene." They would live in this small Nazareth village, located just a few miles north of the Plain of Esdraelon, and located in southern Galilee, a little hillside village 1300 feet above sea level, surrounded on the east, west, and north by hills, with only a southern way out.

Jesus was raised like any other mountain boy there in Nazareth, in a community that had only one water spring and cisterns to collect enough water for the community. Nazareth was by no means a choice place to raise a family, but it was God's place for Joseph and Mary and family. Protected by hills, by isolation, and by anonymity to the outer world, Jesus became a carpenter, helped provide for family, and only left when God called through that Voice in the Wilderness, John the Baptist, down in the Jordan Valley at Aenon, near the Dead Sea; and Jesus knew that His Time had Come to go.

"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" That is the question, and Jesus is Himself the answer. Joseph and Mary were refugees in a foreign place, and, like us, wanted to live in a familiar place where they could enjoy their family and familiarity. But life didn't work that way for them, and doesn't work that way for us. God still uproots us from the barren soil of the familiar so that we might grow and be fruitful in the rich soil of the Providential. As it was with Joseph and Mary, so is it with us.

We live in another Nazareth village here in East Kentucky. Our mountain villages have been in the past largely isolated from the rest of the world, and, consequently, we became somewhat narrow and provincial in our view of religion and missions. But God also sent us here, and we have changed, and the world has changed, and, being sent here, we must look at our situation as Providential. But God has nourished us here to send us out to the rest of the world.

Our time has come. Can any good thing come out of Pippa Passes? Can any good thing come out of Knott County? Can any good thing come out of East Kentucky? The answer is yes! But we must be willing to live where we are, and to go where we are sent; for 'in Christ' alone is our dwelling place, our life, our only home.

All this and more we get from the angel in the dream who:
appeared in a strange place;
with a strange message;
sent Joseph to a strange country;
sent Joseph back to a strange community.