

“Not in Your Wildest Dreams”
Matthew 1:18-25
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The Woodside Church

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All of us dream. One website gives these facts about dreams:

1. One third of our lives is spent sleeping. You will spend about 6 years of your life dreaming. That is more than 2,100 days spent in a different world.
2. We dream on average 1 or 2 hours every night and often have 4-7 dreams in 1 night.
3. Everybody dreams. EVERYBODY! Simply because you do not remember your dream does not mean that you did not dream. Five minutes after the end of the dream, half the content is forgotten. After ten minutes, 90% is lost.
4. Nightmares are common in children, typically beginning at around age 3 and occurring up to age 7-8.
5. Studies show we all tend to daydream an average of 70-120 minutes a day.

So we dream day and night. Dreams help us solve problems, escape reality, imagine wishes coming true. It's like the woman who woke her husband at night and said, "Honey, I dreamed I was at an auction for husbands. Some husbands were going for \$50,000 and some for millions." Her husband asked, "How much were husbands like me going for?" She replied, "I'm not sure. I was busy bidding on Brad Pitt."

"Follow your dreams." That's what we tell young people when they leave home, go off to college, hunt for a job, try to make it big in music, arts, acting. "Follow your dreams" we tell adults who aspire to reach higher on the rung, go back to school or reenter the workforce. "Follow your dreams" we tell those retiring and hoping to finally do what they've deferred their whole lives. It's important to have dreams and goals. Yet following your dreams might end in one of three ways:

1. Your Dreams are Dashed – your wishes don't come true. After a period of disappointment, you move on and dream of something else.
2. Your Dreams Come True - and they are not that great. The reality turns out to be boring, annoying or unsatisfying. So you move on and dream of something else.
3. Your Dreams Turn to Nightmares – you turn to that thing for entertainment, excitement, euphoria. You want to escape reality and wind up in a darker reality. Or maybe your dreams were destroyed by forces beyond your control – illness, heartache, unemployment, death. It's hard to move on and dream of something else.

It's good to have dreams. But maybe it's not wise to follow them too closely. Constantly chasing one dream after another is an empty way to live. Speaking of Brad Pitt, Rolling Stone magazine once asked his views on the American dream:

Man, I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that's the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more isolation and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is that at this point in time, we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being. And I don't want that.

Rolling Stone asked: So if we're heading toward this kind of existential dead end in society, what do you think should happen?

Hey, man, I don't have those answers yet. The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. I'm sitting in it, and I'm telling you, that's not it. I'm the guy who's got everything. I know. But I'm telling you, once you've got everything, then you're just left with yourself. I've said it before and I'll say it again: it doesn't help you sleep any better, and you don't wake up any better because of it.¹

It's a rude awakening to finally grab hold of your dream and discover it's empty. It's worse to see your dreams for the future suddenly turn into a living nightmare. That's what Joseph faced.

Joseph has dreams. Recently come from Bethlehem, the Galilee is probably a good place for a carpenter and builder to find work. The main road passes through there bringing travelers from every tribe in the Roman Empire. They will need furniture and farm tools, wagons and homes. He can make enough to support a family. For that too is part of his dream – to find a suitable wife and settle down in the right village. Nazareth is the town he chooses. Mary is the young woman. All his dreams are coming true. Joseph may assume God is blessing him for leading a righteous, religious life. He obeys God's Law. Now all he has to do is wait for the wedding day. Yes, Joseph is living his dream.

Then comes the day when his dream turns to a nightmare. One simple word shatters his world: pregnant. Mary, his beloved fiancée, is pregnant.

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. (Matthew 1:18-19)

It is bad enough she cheated on him with another man. But her ridiculous story about an angel, a Holy Spirit and a prophecy that the child will be God's Son is more than he can take. Joseph is now caught in a nightmarish conflict between his head and his heart. Being a righteous man, his head tells him what God's law requires for an unfaithful fiancée. According to Law (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), the punishment is death by stoning. Yet in his heart, Joseph still loves Mary and cannot bring himself to expose her to this fate. There is another side to his righteousness: compassion and mercy. No matter how

¹ *Rolling Stone* (10-28-99).

deeply she wounds him, he has to find another way. He wants to do God's will. But which is right? Judgment or Mercy? He can only see one way out of this dilemma: quietly break off the engagement. Perhaps if he leaves town, everyone will assume it's his child, he is a deadbeat father who ran out on the poor girl. In that way, he will shoulder her shame, take her blame and save her life. When he came to Nazareth to start a new life he never dreamed it would end in this nightmare.

Restless and wrestling all night, Joseph eventually falls into a deep sleep and dreams. This time the dream is so real he isn't sure if he is asleep or awake. An angel of the Lord, glorious and terrifying, calls his name: "Joseph, son of David." Son of David? His father's name is Jacob. Again the angel speaks, "Joseph, descendant of King David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife." Afraid? Is he afraid? He is trying to be just. Maybe he is afraid: afraid to love and trust a woman who betrays him, afraid of what others will say, afraid of losing his pride and self-respect, afraid of what God will think. And yet here is an angel from God saying, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home." "She speaks the truth," the angel continues, "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21)

'A Savior?' Joseph thinks. 'What kind of Savior?' Apparently this Child will not save them from the Romans, or from poverty or from disease. He will save them from something far deeper and more difficult to cure: He will save them from humanity's greatest nightmare. He will save them from the one enemy that has unleashed countless nightmares in every age. He will save them from their sins. "How will He do this?" Joseph wonders. "How will He save us from our sins?" In the same way Joseph intended to save Mary. He planned to save her life by shouldering the blame and shame. This Child will save the world in the same way.

Joseph awakes from this dream bathed in sweat. There is no longer any question in his mind. He must do whatever he can to ensure this Child comes into the world. He endures the looks and the scorn of his neighbors when they see Mary's growing stomach. He supports her on the long journey to Bethlehem and searches for at least a corner of a cave where she could give birth. More dreams come and he carefully obeys each one. They tell him to spirit away the Child and His mother in the middle of the night, find a home for them in Egypt, sneak past Herod's son and bring his family safely back to Nazareth. Joseph serves the Lord all his days. Never in his wildest dreams did Joseph imagine God would place in his care the Savior of the world.

What do you do when your dreams turn to nightmares? Instead of following your dreams, follow the Lord as Joseph did. Joseph shows us **God's Dreams Are Always Bigger than Ours**. The problem is not that the American dream is too big. It's too small. We weren't created to live for stuff – money, cars, houses, jobs. Those are the wrong target. They are tools for living, not the goal of your life. How do I know? It seems everyone my age is trying to unload the house and the stuff they worked all those years to get. That's why the American dream never satisfies. I grieve when I see so many in our community chasing the wrong things and missing their lives. God has much greater goals for our lives if we are willing to look and listen. Paul once said,

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

I would be happy if God would do what I ask or imagine. Yet He does immeasurably more than all I ask or imagine. Here's the difference: the dream is what God imagines, not what I do. Joseph's dream was to build a carpenter shop, raise a family, maybe save some money. God's dream is to build a kingdom, redeem humanity and save the world. You are made for more. God is calling you to be part of His much greater dream for the world. Why not align yourself with God's greater dream?

To follow God's dream you will need to **Surrender Your Pride and Fear**. Pride and fear give birth to nightmares. Pride tells me, "I must have my way." Fear whispers, "My way is under attack." Pride and fear drive us into the nightmare of fight, flight or fall apart. Joseph could have let his wounded pride or the fear of his neighbors send Mary to her death. He almost abandoned her. But the Lord tells him to give up his fear and pride and take Mary home to be his wife. He chooses neither fight nor flight. He doesn't fall apart. Instead, Joseph walks through his nightmare with faith.

Pause for a moment and call to mind a dream that is drawing you or a nightmare that's gnawing you right now. Picture it in your mind and then ask yourself: "What do I want in this situation?" and "What do I fear in this situation?" Now be honest with yourself: is there anything selfish in what you want? Is there anything unlikely or irrational in what you fear? Ask God to help you let these go. Of course, not everything you want is selfish and not everything you fear is irrational. But let's go a step farther. Once you let go of fighting for what you want and fleeing from what you fear, ask yourself these questions: "What does God want in this situation?" "What is God doing in this situation?" and "How can I join God and help Him bring about His dream?" I know it's easy for someone to tell you to let go of your pride or ignore your fears if they've never made such a sacrifice. Yet remember: we follow Jesus who overcame the ultimate nightmare by making the ultimate sacrifice. In the power of that great love, we can walk through our nightmares with faith.

Third, when you follow God's dream you **Help Whoever is in Need**. Mary is in a dangerous position. Joseph can walk away. But instead he dedicates his whole life to protecting and caring for Mary and her first born Son. He never sees the fulfillment of his dreams. By all accounts, Joseph dies years before Jesus begins his ministry. Yet because he walked through every nightmare, Joseph helped God's dream of salvation for us come true.

If you want to give a gift to Jesus on his birthday, then do something for the poor, the needy, the hurting, the hopeless, or the homeless this Christmas and throughout the New Year. What dream is Jesus giving you this Christmas? Is it to work with Habitat for Humanity? Is it to go on a Mission trip to Haiti, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Appalachia or Alabama next year? Is it to help with Code Blue, the Dinner Ministry, Family Promise, the Prison Ministry, the Recovery worship service? Is it to work with Trenton Area Soup Kitchen, Urban Promise, Cast Your Cares or the Recovery Cafe? Is it to start a new mission outreach? Is it to fulfill your pledge so we can purchase a well for a village in Mozambique? Is it to invite a friend or family member to worship on Christmas Eve? Is it to teach young people the Bible in Adventure Club or Discovery Kingdom,

School of the Rock, Fusion or Ignite? Is it to lead a Growth Group, invite someone to join your Growth Group or multiply your Growth Group? You will help someone wake up from their nightmare and start to live God's dream.

No matter what the cost, Joseph stood by Mary and Jesus. He's what I call an Encourager. Our community and our world need more Encouragers. Why? Smack in the middle of the word encouragement is courage. All of us need someone to come beside us and put courage in us and all of us can be that person for many others. Author and artist Mary Anne Radmacher says, "Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying 'I will try again tomorrow.'" As followers of Jesus we know that quiet voice is the Holy Spirit – the one who puts courage in us to keep going at home, at school, at work, in life. Want to know how to have and give more encouragement? Join us starting January 5, when our message series will be Encouragement – the courage to keep going. We will follow the life of Barnabas – the Son of Encouragement. We'll learn why encouragement is essential, how to be a friend not a fixer, how to listen and build each other. Encouragement is a skill you can use to improve your marriage, family, friendships, school, team and office. Let's make 2020 a courageous year!

Pastor Erwin McManus put courage in his son Aaron. He helped Aaron walk through his nightmare into God's dream.

One summer Aaron went to a youth camp. He was just a little guy, and I was kind of glad because it was a church camp. I figured he wasn't going to hear all those ghost stories, because ghost stories can really cause a kid to have nightmares. But unfortunately, since it was a Christian camp and they didn't tell ghost stories, they told demon and Satan stories instead. And so when Aaron got home, he was terrified.

"Dad, don't turn off the light!" he said before going to bed. "No, Daddy, could you stay here with me? Daddy, I'm afraid. They told all these stories about demons." And I wanted to say, "They're not real." He goes, "Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?" I could feel it. I could feel warm-blanket Christianity beginning to wrap around him, a life of safety, safety, safety. I said, "Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room." And he goes, "All right. But pray I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy."

Have you come to that place in your life where you stop asking God to give you a safe life, and make you a dangerous follower of Jesus Christ?²

It won't be easy. It may not be safe. But it'll be a life you never imagined in your wildest dreams

² Erwin McManus, "Seizing Your Divine Moment," Preaching Today, Issue 252