

Yr. A, Christmas 2
January 5, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1497 Words

Lessons: **Jeremiah 31:7-14**
****Psalm 84****
****Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a****
****Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23****

Above all, Joseph was a dreamer! And he was not afraid...to follow his dreams.

In today's Gospel according to St. Matthew, this new, little family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus has just been showered with amazing gifts from the Magi. It would have been easy to *finally relax* with the security of all that wealth. It would have been easy to feel special and blessed as the center of attention and adoration in that little town of Bethlehem. But Joseph had a dream.

A non-descript messenger appeared in Joseph's dream, and said, "Run for your lives! Leave this ancestral homeland of yours. Flee the tyranny of Herod. Take the child and Mary to Egypt."

With all due respect to St. Matthew, that dream was really a nightmare. And God bless Joseph for paying attention. He got up, took the child and his mother, and fled into the night. He did what he was called to do in order to protect his family.

Twenty centuries later, despite *all* the technological progress of humankind, we still have no reliable prevention against tyranny and hatred, fueled—*as it always is*—by fear.

The bottom line is that Herod the Great was afraid...of being *replaced*, and so he used violence and intimidation to hold on to his power. For the past decade, Bashar al Assad was afraid of being replaced, and so he has used violence and intimidation to hold on to power. ISIS, gangs, the Taliban, drug lords, white supremacists, abusive spouses—bullies of all sorts are really just *afraid*...of being replaced, and so they use violence and intimidation to try and hold on.

Think about this: we can access all the knowledge of humankind with the click of a mouse...we can land spaceships on the moon and even on Mars...we can look far beyond our solar system at light that began traveling long before Jesus was born; but we still cannot seem to address the problems of tyranny and hatred, fueled—as it always is—by fear.

We can build corporations worth trillions of dollars for private shareholders, but we still struggle to build trust—based on truth—with a shared passion for the *common* good...and for the exalted purpose of offering liberty and justice for all, including refugees.

This is why there are still so many Joseph's and Mary's in our world, running for their lives. There are still so many whose dreams are more like nightmares. History will recall one of the defining features of this past decade as refugee migration—modern families following in the footsteps of Joseph and Mary...fathers, mothers, and children who ran for their lives across borders throughout the world.

My first memory of feeling really proud of my Church was when I was still a child. My congregation adopted a Vietnamese refugee family. They ran for their lives, and we helped them. We got them a safe home to live in. We filled it with appliances and groceries. And we helped them get back on their feet, welcoming them into our little town.

I still remember going with my parents over to their house, and taking things to help them begin a new life. They did not look like us. They did not sound like us. They did not worship like us. And I noticed how *none of that* seemed to matter to us...or *them*.

Except that it did matter a great deal to *me*, because it was my first experience of cultural and religious diversity, and this formative experience was defined by compassion and trust.

Although I personally could not offer much more than just being friendly with the children when I saw them at school, I still felt like I was part of something special, and life-changing. I got the chance—through my church and my parents—to be part of an exalted plan, sharing liberty and justice with a refugee family in our little town.

That family *and* my congregation had a dream, and we were not afraid to follow our dreams!

My oldest daughter gave me a book for Christmas—*Life Undercover* by Amaryllis Fox. It is her story of coming of age in the CIA. In just the first few pages it is obvious that Amaryllis is tough as nails. How many single, young women do you know traipsing alone through the alleys of Karachi, Pakistan?

We meet her there, shaking off a stalker, and then later as a precocious child and a quirky adolescent and a brilliant university student. Let me tell you, Amaryllis is no wall flower.

And yet—without revealing too much about the book—*her* greatest contribution to our nation's espionage during the age of the war on terror—was her simple (and accurate) insight about the commonality of fear...and hope among most all people on every side of a conflict.

Amaryllis had an unparalleled ability to relate to other peoples' fears and hopes as she successfully intercepted black market nuclear weapons material from shady sellers *and* nefarious buyers.

After a particularly successful negotiation with a buyer who wanted more tools to seek revenge against our nation, this is what Amaryllis told her boss: "The Agency taught me to fight terrorism by convincing my enemy that I'm *scary*. (My young daughter,) Zoe, taught me to fight by taking off my mask and showing my enemy that I'm *human*."

She went on to say this: "I know that both paths might lead to security, but only Zoe's path leads to *actual peace*." (p. 218)

It sounds like Amaryllis had a dream, and she was not afraid to follow her dreams!

A woman walked through the doors of our church the other night, ushered from the parking lot by Tom Priddy, our Senior Warden. She was nearly hyperventilating with fear, having lost nearly everything from not just one—but two—crooked, abusive landlords in a row. She was essentially a refugee in her own city.

She is one of the many people whose manufacturing jobs get suspended during the Christmas Season without pay. She needed enough gas in her tank and enough food in her pantry to make it to Saturday. She and Tom had a chance to speak while I looked for a grocery gift card.

He gave her a little gas money and *very effectively* helped calm her fears. I very *ineffectively* searched for the grocery gift cards in the office. And so, I asked her to follow me to the nearest grocery store, next to the nearest gas station.

With *your* generosity to the clergy discretionary fund, I replenished our inventory of emergency food cards and I discretely handed one to her where she stood next to the shopping carts.

As much as she needed the food and the gas, she also needed someone to believe in her. We all do!

And so, very quietly, I added a blessing to the one Tom had already given her back at the church. “Do not be afraid. You are loved by God. You have gifts and abilities. You have a job and a family. You *will* bounce back from these tyrants who scammed you.”

She smiled and said, “You’re right. I *will*. I trust in God. I know I can do this.”

What she was really saying is that she had a dream, and she was not afraid to follow her dream!

As we begin a new year, I want *you* to trust the words of Holy Scripture—from the prophet Jeremiah who describes God as our loving Father, protecting and nurturing his children. And also, from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians when he talks about God as a wise and loving father who gives you permission to *hope* and *not fear*. And from this Gospel story of Joseph, who *was* a brave and protective father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Trust that *you* are a beloved child of God. And then *live that way*.

Show compassion as if you are a beloved child of God. Build trust as if you are a beloved child of God. Seek peace as if you are a beloved child of God. Bless other people as if you are blessed as a beloved child of God.

You and I may occasionally face dangers and uncertainties, just as other people do, but we do not have to let our fears determine who we will become. We have the privilege of letting the love of our God—the God and Father of all—to determine who we will become.

And our God was *so* determined, as I prayed in the opening Collect, that he humbled himself to share our humanity for the sole purpose that we might use this gift in order to share the divine life.

Dear sisters and brothers, because of Christmas—because Christ was born into the human family—we are all adopted as God’s children. And so, we do not have to live in fear.

We can dream! And not be afraid to follow our dreams!

Amen.