

Second Sunday after Christmas Day
January 3, 2010

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Today's Gospel begins with the departure of the three Magi and proceeds through two more departures of Jesus and Joseph and Mary. The verse which precedes today's Gospel story of Joseph's dreams sending him hither and thaw, hither and yond, the verse that precedes it tells us that the Magi have also been warned in a dream, warned that they should not return to Herod, but rather should make their way back to their homes in the east by circumventing that tyrannical ruler. And today's Gospel story begins with Joseph also dreaming a warning dream. The angel of the Lord comes back to Joseph; remember the angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in his troubled time when he learned that Mary was to have a child. This is a few months or perhaps years later after the visit of the wise men and now the angel commands Joseph to rise and flee to Egypt. Through the device of dreams God's angel gives Joseph all sorts of important advice. In the earlier angelic appearance in Matthew's Gospel, the angel has told Joseph not to divorce Mary, even though Joseph has learned that Mary, his fiancée is with child, but rather indeed to take her as his wife, for the child is of God, the angel tells Joseph, conceived through the Holy Spirit. The angel even tells Joseph how to name the son when he's born – Jesus, the Greek form of the Hebrew, Yehoshua, which means "he who saves". Then after Jesus' birth in the stable in Bethlehem, after the visits by the angels and the shepherds and the Magi, another dream comes to Joseph, this one we hear about today. God's angel is back again; this time the angel tells Joseph to make haste to quit Judea because Herod, the Royal Governor is about to massacre all children under the age of two. As a result of that warning, Joseph and his little family flee by night to Egypt and for a while are aliens in a foreign land. Joseph has certainly heeded the angel's advice to nurture this child sent from God and when Herod at last dies, God's angel returns once again to Joseph's dreams with directions to return to Judea and Joseph does so obediently. When he arrives back in his native Palestine he learns that Herod's son, Archaeus sits in his father's place and that Archaeus is no less tyrannical than his father. Joseph has yet another dream which sends him to Galilee to the quiet back-water village of Nazareth. There in Nazareth far from the political centers of the Roman Empire, Joseph and Mary make a home for their son Jesus, Yehoshua, the one who saves, and the boy will grow up within the safety of his Galilean village. What would have happened had Joseph not had those dreams or perhaps more important, what might not have happened had Joseph had not listened to and heeded his dreams? Do you pay particular attention to your dreams? Unless you're a Jungian analyst or perhaps a therapist you may even think you don't dream, but sleep researchers claim we dream a great deal. And psychologists who study dreams and dream recall and meaning of dreams tell us that our dream life can be a rich part of our self-awareness. For some of us our dreams remain a rich part of our unawareness as we choose to ignore them totally. I'll always remember when dear friends of mine married; they made some vows to one another which were a bit different from those in our wedding liturgy. One was that they would help one another with housework. I was near the front of the congregation and I well remember hearing snickers from some folks at that one. I thought that vow was terrific!

Sharing housework was some years back as yet a new concept in some marriages. But the vow I found most entrancing was their promise to honor the dreams of your days as well as the dreams of your nights. I knew that couple pretty well and their descriptions of dreams and discussions about them have proved invaluable in their life together. Freud's revolutionary work on dreams felt by current scholars to be too narrowly sexual in focus opened the door to remarkable discoveries about the unconscious, an integral and invaluable part of ourselves. Dream work was normal stuff in the days of the Old Testament characters. The patriarch Joseph had seminal dreams, which like today in the story of Joseph, Jesus' father, sent Joseph the patriot in a new direction as a servant of God. Remember that Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, interesting connection there, sold into slavery, having been sold by his wicked brother – do you remember that? And Joseph, the patriarch, ended up interpreting dreams for the ruler of Egypt, the Pharaoh – dreams about plagues, as well as dreams about the political repercussions of craftiness and greed. And because of his prowess as a dream interpreter, Joseph the Israelite became a most powerful man there in Egypt. Pharaoh said of him: "Can we find anyone else like this -- one in whom is the spirit of God?" And made Joseph his number two ruler. Like Joseph of old, Jesus' father Joseph – well he wasn't exactly Jesus' father, but he took full responsibility for being Jesus' parent, bless his obedient heart. Jesus' faithful father hearkened to his dreams and as a result immigrated to Egypt for political safety. Then, thanks again to a dream; Joseph made his choice of Nazareth as a place to settle. Again, for political reasons, to protect this God-Child from the tyrannical Roman governor in Jerusalem. If you went to your boss at work and told him or her about a dream you had had and expected your boss to understand that as a result of your dream you were going to change your action plan. What so you think would happen? Now I can do that with my boss, but in this culture, it's really not normal to speak of dreams, any more than it is normal in our culture to tell our boss that our prayers have led us to choose such and such a course of action – I can do that too with my boss. And yet, I believe that God speaks to us through dreams, just as God spoke to Joseph in today's colorful action passage from Matthew's Gospel. That's why my friends made that solemn vow in front of their family and their friends at their wedding ceremony. Now I know them pretty well and I've observed them as they honor one another's dreams and visions and I've realized that when they work at it, when each spends some time hearing the other's dreams or the other's vision of a better life or the other's nightmare about something they're struggling with, they're communicating. Each time one listens to another's dream or nightmare she or he is aware of the other. They're working together and I believe this works in other relationships as well. Not all of us have a spouse who will listen to our dreams, but hopefully all of us have a couple of friends or family members we trust, we love enough to be vulnerable with them. I suspect that when we're too busy to listen to one another's nightmares or day dreams or visions for the future, whether we're married or good friends, we're ignoring our vows to honor one another, our wedding vows or our baptismal vows. Psychologists tell us lots about dreams, that all the characters in our dreams are parts of ourselves, that in dreams time means nothing, that the symbols we read in dreams, can show us what we're afraid of, what we long for, show us who we might be if we paid attention to ourselves, who we might be if we listen to God's Spirit speaking to us. In his class this morning our Canon Theologian, Marcus Borg, talked about God's dream for the Kingdom, God's dream of justice, of love, of peace; God

too dreams. In our dreams our unconscious self is important to our growth and it is the unconscious, our yearnings, our desires, our fears, our ambitions, which forms the stuff of our dreams. We see this in the story of Joseph. The angel, is that of God, which is also of Joseph, common sense at times. I'd better pay close attention to what's going on around us or recognition of danger; those sages from the east had nothing good to say about Herod, did they? Or fatherly love – "I'll do whatever I need to do to protect my infant son and beloved wife". But we must be wary of ourselves for our unconscious is constantly being challenged, circumvented even by our ego – ego, the part of us which wants to be correct or the part of us which was programmed in us in our childhood to be rational. The ego is not part of dreams; the ego wants to forget the dream and respond to "oughts" and "shoulds". But dreams are different from "oughts" and "shoulds". In fact in life when we hear ourselves saying: "I ought to" or "I should", we must look very closely at what we really mean by that. Our "oughts" and our "shoulds" often drive us far from our authentic selves, so beware of "oughts" and "shoulds". Have you ever in all the words Jesus speaks in the Gospels heard him say "ought" or "should" about himself? God speaks to us in many ways – through the advice of friends, through the examples of others, through prayer, from inspiration, and yes, through dreams. I invite you to honor God's Holy Spirit by paying attention to your dreams. Check them out: become aware of your fears, your desires, what you might become. Know your dreams; write them down; pray with them; act on them. Joseph and Joseph acted wisely on their dreams. We can too and when we do the angel of the Lord is much more than an historical figure. Amen