

# Sermon

December 18, 2016 | The 4th Sunday of Advent  
Text: Matthew 1:18-25 | Preacher: Dan Puchalla

*Go, go, go, Joseph, you know what they say,  
Hang on now, Joseph, you'll make it some day.  
Sha la la, Joseph, you're doing fine,  
you and your dreams are ahead of their time.*

Such is the chorus sung to Joseph in one of my favorite musicals, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. That 1970 musical was Broadway's retelling of the story from Genesis about Joseph the Patriarch, who after being betrayed by his brothers ended up saving them from starvation and ensuring the future of Israel. But why shouldn't we also sing this chorus for the hero of today's story, too: Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus.

*Sha la la, Joseph, you're doing fine,  
you and your dreams are ahead of their time.*

I think the author of the Gospel of Matthew would be happy if we did sing this about the Joseph in today's story. It's not a coincidence that this Joseph is a dreamer just like the Joseph in Genesis. Matthew would *want* us to think of the story of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* when we read the story of Jesus' birth.

Let me refresh your memory about how that Genesis story goes. It's a convoluted story, so stay with me. Here's the story from Genesis: Joseph – to avoid confusion, let's call this one Technicolor Joseph – Joseph was the youngest son of Jacob, who was later renamed Israel. Technicolor Joseph was also Jacob's favorite son, and Jacob wasn't too good at concealing this fact from his other sons. So Joseph's brothers were intensely jealous of him. What's more, Joseph was a bit of a snot, and not too good at concealing fact either. One day, Joseph had a dream in which he became supremely powerful and wealthy, while his brothers became his servants. And he proceeded to gleefully tell his brothers all about this dream. Well, that was the last straw. The brothers sold Technicolor Joseph into slavery.

Eventually, Joseph found himself in Egypt serving in the household of one of Pharaoh's courtiers. Things got worse for Joseph before they got better, but suffice it to say that Joseph gained a reputation for being able to interpret dreams. One day, he was called to Pharaoh himself to interpret some of his dreams. Joseph interpreted the dreams to mean that Egypt was about to have seven years of abundance and then seven years of famine. Therefore, Pharaoh should store up grain while the harvest was plentiful so that there would be enough food when the harvest

was dismal. Pharaoh agreed to do just that, and he put Joseph in charge. So, Egypt had plenty of food during the famine while neighboring lands are going hungry, including the land of Canaan, where Joseph's family was still living. Yada, yada, yada, Joseph's family comes to Egypt to find food, Joseph reconciles with his brothers, and all the Israelites live and multiply happily in Egypt for generations. Technicolor Joseph's story has a happy ending.

But then comes the book of Exodus, and the party's over. Another Pharaoh comes to power and forgets the role of the Israelites in helping the Egyptians. This Pharaoh resents the presence of these foreigners, especially since they are making so many babies, and so he decides to enslave them all. But they continue to multiply. So, then he orders all Egyptian midwives to kill any male child born to a Hebrew woman. And thus begins the story of Moses. When Moses is born, he is secreted away down the Nile and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. And you probably know the rest: Moses becomes Israel's liberator from slavery; he becomes their lawgiver, judge, and prophet; and he becomes the most important figure of their national and religious identity.

Got all that? Good, because this whole convoluted, fantastic story is what Matthew wants you to keep in mind, what he wants you to *remember*, as you read his Christmas story.

See if any of this sounds familiar: the Joseph of today's story – to avoid confusion, let's call this one Christmas Joseph – Christmas Joseph is a dreamer, too, just like Technicolor Joseph. In his dream, he is told not to divorce Mary because the baby she carries is from God and will save their people. That's the bit of the story we get today, but, as you know, there's more. After Jesus is born, Magi arrive in Jerusalem following a star that they believe points to a newborn king. They unwisely consult with King Herod about this. Herod tells them to go search for the child and report back to him once they've found this Messiah so that he can also pay him homage. I imagine Herod said this while twirling his mustache because he actually intended to have this baby murdered. After the Magi find Jesus, they have a dream telling them not to go back to Herod. And Herod, realizing that the Magi have stood him up, decides to just murder all children in Bethlehem under two years old. But Joseph's dreams save the day. This time he's told to take his family to Egypt until Herod is dead. Thus is the story of how Joseph saved Christmas.

All the pieces of the old stories are here in Matthew's story: a man named Joseph, a savior child, Egypt, an evil king, the slaughter of children, and dreams. Christmas Joseph and Technicolor Joseph rhyme with each other.

*Sha la la, Josephs, you're doing fine,  
you and your dreams are ahead of their time.*

But why do they rhyme? Why does Matthew tell his Christmas story this way? I'm going to give you two reasons. One is obvious, the other is more imaginative – or, let's say, more dreamy.

The obvious reason is that Matthew wants to tell us that Jesus is the new Moses. This is the thesis of Matthew's entire gospel, and we ought to remember it as we read from Matthew heavily over the coming year. Matthew's argument is that Jesus is, like Moses, both liberator and lawgiver, and that Jesus has come in order to finally bring to fulfillment the equitable commonwealth inaugurated by God through Moses. Matthew's Christmas story is his thesis statement. Just as the dreams of Technicolor Joseph prepared the way for Moses, so too the dreams of Christmas Joseph prepared the way for Jesus.

Now, this theological argument that Jesus is the new Moses is all well and good, but how does that help us to live the lives we're supposed to live now? That's where the dreamy reason comes in. Matthew's Christmas story is not just about a guy who dreams; it is an invitation to us also to be dreamers.

Remember when I said all the pieces of the old stories are here in Matthew's story: a man named Joseph, a savior child, Egypt, an evil king, the slaughter of babies, and dreams. Well, all the pieces *are* there in Matthew's Christmas story, but they're also a bit *mixed up*. It's as if the Genesis and Exodus stories were made of Lego, and Matthew took apart all those pieces and built something new and wonderful out of this whole mess.

What I'm proposing is that Matthew's story is itself like a dream. Think about how most of our dreams go. Usually, our brains take details and feelings from our everyday lives, take them apart, and mix them up to create something new. A few weeks ago while on vacation, I binge watched nature documentaries and videos about space travel. A few days later, I dreamt that I was in charge of a wildlife refuge on Venus. When we dream, our brains take the stuff of our world and create new worlds that are bizarre, illogical, sometimes frightening, sometimes fun, and often wondrous. Such is what Matthew does to tell us his Christmas story.

Indeed, researchers have amassed evidence that there is a deep connection between dreaming and creativity. When we dream, our brains do that which is necessary for any creative endeavor:

free association. When we dream, the parts of our brains that tell us something is illogical, impossible, or impractical are shut off.<sup>1</sup> In such a free environment, the brain starts making new and unexpected connections between disparate ideas – like wildlife conservation and the planet Venus, or like between the millennia-old stories about the patriarchs and a poor criminal rabbi named Jesus.

This Advent, the scriptures and our preachers have been telling us to stay awake – or stay woke. Kenji taught us to stay woke to the forces of evil of our day working to corrupt and destroy human life. Jennifer taught us to keep watch for new life to spring from the stump. Peter taught us not to escape from evil by retreating into fantasy but to face it with steadfast and purposeful patience. Amen, amen, and amen.

Yet as we come to the end of Advent, the message of staying woke turns to these stories of dreamers. Our dreaming Josephs don't negate being woke but fulfill it. In fact, in both stories, dreams make our Josephs more awake to what's happening in the world around them. The dreaming into which Matthew invites us is neither sleepy indifference nor fantastical escapism. It is the creative rearranging of the world as we find it in order to see the world as God intended it. But we can only do this by allowing ourselves the space and freedom to be a little illogical, a little impractical, a little dreamy.

As we face this next year with great anxiety, let us remember the God who speaks to us in our dreams. Let us embrace theater and art and dance and liturgy and all the realms in which our minds are let loose from the shackles of the world as it merely is. Let us make space in our work, in our families, in our politics, and in this very building for some wacky and wild ideas. Let us keep shouting to the world that God isn't done with us yet, and that this species of ours is still capable of bringing into creation impossible love loveliness.

*People of God, you're doing fine,  
you and your dreams are ahead of their time.*

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<sup>1</sup> Tori DeAngelis, "The Dream Canvas," *Monitor on Psychology*, American Psychological Association, 2013. <http://www.apa.org/monitor/nov03/canvas.aspx>