

Sermon Archive 180

Sunday 17 December, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 1: 26-38

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I'm going to start this sermon talking about a dream I had. I thought twice about starting the sermon this way, since dreams are just weird. But no more weird, I guess, than being addressed by an angel! So let's go with it.

-ooOoo-

Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I'll have a vague recall of something I've been dreaming, and normally it fades away straight away. But one morning, sometime during my mid-thirties, I woke up with a vivid recall of a dream. In the dream I'd been on a long walk on a hot, sunny day. The landscape was open - something like a subdivision that's been established, but no one's built a house yet. I remember fresh light grey concrete curbing and channelling of dark black streets in a green grass environment. It was a landscape ready for occupation, but as yet empty of people. On my walk, I met two young men. They looked like they might have been in their mid to late teens. One was blond and the other had dark hair. We talked about stuff - and the conversation was quite spirited. These were confident, intelligent young guys. I enjoyed talking to them. At the end of our walk, as we moved into a busier, more peopled environment, I seem to recall it was outside a petrol station, we parted ways, and I was left with the certain knowledge that I'd been talking to the children that I would never have. I woke up. I couldn't shake the dream's last impression.

Up until then, I'd always imagined that my life without romance (or kids) was kind of a temporary state. Partnership formation had stalled; but a stall can be prelude to a restart, can't it! I'd always imagined that one day the stars would align and I **would** become a father - like my father, and his father before him. (I stand in a long line of fathers.) But **this** morning I woke up with an odd conviction that fatherhood was not a gift that I would receive. I didn't want to believe it. And I didn't have to believe it, since it was only a dream - and dreams are just fading things. So I was a bit confused that this morning I just

kind of knew. A dream convinced.

I imagine that psychologists could dream up a theory to explain it. Perhaps I was subconsciously coming to the realisation that standard heterosexual partnering was not “me” - and that that realising was leaking out into my dream life - a life one step removed from my strongly developed capacity for orientation denial. It kind of makes sense, I suppose. The mind provides a way for us to approach the things, to consider the things, to gently direct us around the things for which we’re not yet ready. The dreaming self is ready for things my waking self can’t yet know.

I have to say, twenty years or so on from the dream, I’ve become totally used to not being a father. And these days, on this side of my mid-life crisis, I’m better at letting go of a whole lot of things that are never going to be. Mid-life has given me plenty of practice. I’d wanted to be a really good singer; I sing quite well. I’d been certain that I’d have a natural aptitude for speaking Spanish; I stumble along en español, but can never quite find the word I need to finish the sentence properly. I’d wanted to be a Maserati minister; I tick along like a Toyota Carolla. And this all is OK; because I’m just me. I won’t shake the world. I won’t tear history in twain. Most of us don’t! And as we reconcile ourselves to that, we become comfortable in our skin. As we come to peace with all the stuff that never will happen, there’s a great “letting go”, and there is peace. It’s all OK!

Have I convinced you? I have to say, I almost convinced myself!

Here, though, is a different kind of story. Is Mary having a dream? Well, if it’s a dream, it’s pretty vivid. It’s the kind of thing that’s in danger of not fading in the morning, in danger of leaving her with a never-before-considered, brand new conviction. She finds herself in conversation with someone about becoming a mother. And becoming a mother hasn’t been on the radar so far. Maybe one day, later, when she’s married and all that. For now the plan is just not parenthood. But the character in the dream is insistent. He insists that it’s true. He insists also that this will be no ordinary life that she’ll create. It’ll be extraordinary! Favour with God. Miraculous conception. Reigning over the whole of the nation. Establishing a rule that never will end. It’s like the opposite of a mid-life crisis, with its slow accepting of reducing options and goals. This is like an early life crisis in which the small, ordinary aspirations of a young woman are blown into cosmic overdrive – things are expanding! Once

Mary's woken from **this** dream, she's going to have a new, unshakeable conviction that her life is going to be remarkable. For, as she's been told, nothing is impossible with God! What do you do with a course-changing dream? A journey-altering alert? Well, Mary embraces it. She says "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

And so it **was** for Mary, according to that great, challenging word.

I wonder which model of life, which model of expectation management, strikes you as most suitable for us. The Matthew model, or the Mary one? Is life a natural process of acknowledging all that is never going to be? Is it a natural accepting, for the sake of eventual peace, of all that we cross off our list? Or, is life more to be seen as a strange angelic engagement that makes us more ambitious, more hopeful of the extraordinary, more engaged with hope and wresting from the "grip of fate" a blessing for the world? Which of these is more "for us"?

I have found it interesting to watch what art, tradition and theology have done to Mary. Art has put a halo on her head. Tradition has called her the Queen of Heaven - labelling her from heaven, not earth. And Catholic theology has insisted that she was immaculately conceived - born completely without original sin. Now it's not that I especially want to embrace a heavy doctrine of original sin; but I do find it interesting that Church dogma has wanted to draw Mary away from the regular human condition - away from common, shared nature - away from being like us. The Church has back-room plotted for Mary to be an exception, a special case - again, **not like us**. And I guess, if we believe that she's not like us, then it would be silly for us to hold up her encounter with the angel as a model for our regular human life - and for the way we manage our aspirations. No, for us, who are regular, everyday human beings, we'd be better to choose the other, more human model - where options close, where hopes kind of stall, and where we're happy (or at least reconciled) when we're told "no". Mary is nothing like us!

However, here's some further thinking about Mary. Across the gospels, she's presented in a deeply human light. She loses track of her twelve year old son - badly organised; it takes her days to find him. She's bossy at a wedding in Cana. At one time she tries to shut down one of Jesus' sermons,

because she thinks her boy's gone mad. And at the end, she can't save him from dying - all she can do is cry. Mary *is* like us. She's a real, genuine, flawed and beautiful human being. And in her dream, she's dared by an angel to hope, to enter a life that is extraordinary, to be part of the mysterious unfolding purposes of the eternal God. Why shouldn't this speak to us? As we negotiate life, with its various crises and temptations not to hope too much, why shouldn't Mary's dream call out our names?

I asked, just a little earlier, an over-simplified question. I asked which of the models is most suitable for us. The Matthew "letting go", or the Mary "let it be?" I asked as if only one could really fit. The truth is, I think, that both models have something to say. In all likelihood, life will indeed be for most human beings an on-going experience of not achieving certain things. Life will ever be a process of letting some things go, and making peace with our disappointments. But that model never has complete ownership on people who journey in faith. Those who journey in faith also get to be challenged by Mary's story - the story of expectations exploded. Maybe that's what saves people of faith from becoming cynical. Maybe that's what stops them from sinking into fatalism. Maybe that's what gives them energy, hope and imagination - as they live within the realities of their lives.

-ooOoo-

One night I had a dream and woke up with a new conviction - the surprise of a sense of loss. Twenty years on I reflect on other losses and things that weren't to be. Yet, does God not put into my spirit another dream - Mary's dream - and ask me also to say "Behold, the servant of the Lord"?

No, I won't be a father - but the life-expanding God greets me with another dream.

We keep a moment of quiet.

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