

# CELTIC ADVENT: DREAMING

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## Matthew 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah\* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' <sup>24</sup> When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;\* and he named him Jesus.

## REFLECT & DISCUSS

1. Read the passage slowly. Then take a deep breath and read it again. What word, phrase, or image stands out to you?
2. Dreams have long been revered and respected as signs from God. The many dream-stories of the Bible speak to this: just in Genesis, there is Jacob's staircase dream and Joseph's dream that got him into family trouble (and his gift of interpreting dreams, which got him out of prison). The dreams of Celtic saints were also revered and respected (many dreams of the saints were written down), and they were a vehicle for conveying God's will and way. In the modern world, some psychologists, therapists, and spiritual teachers have encouraged dreaming and

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interpreting dreams to help people make sense of their lives.

- a. Do you pay attention to, cultivate, write down, or strive to interpret your dreams? If so, what is that like for you? What has helped you remember or engage your dreams?
  - b. Have you ever had a dream that revealed something to you or gave you insight? What did you learn from that dream?
3. Have you ever experienced a wild reversal like Joseph? Has God ever messed up your plans, and then it turned out better than you could have possibly imagined? What happened, and what did you learn from that experience?
4. Matthew describes Joseph as righteous/just, and then offers us some glimpses: first, Joseph chooses to keep Mary's honor in mind when he learns she is pregnant, not trying to dissolve their betrothal in a way that would harm, extort, or disgrace her. He chooses to go above and beyond what the law itself would require or allow for. Then, after his dream, Joseph chooses to accept a different kind of fatherhood—embracing and raising a child that is not his.

Indeed, even risking his life for this child as he takes the family to Egypt, fleeing the murderous tyrant Herod (Matthew 2:7-15).

Reflect on the ministry and teaching of Jesus—how do you see him reflecting and extending the courage and compassion his adoptive father showed?

5. As the extended season of Advent draws to a close this year, what have you been learning, exploring, or practicing? What spiritual insights have you gained?

#### **A NOTE ON THE VIRGIN BIRTH**

The idea of “the virgin birth” has divided and confounded Christians.

In Isaiah, the Hebrew reads “*a young woman* conceives,” and the word for “virgin” is not used. However, Matthew is using a Greek translation, and that version uses a Greek word that *can* (but doesn't have to) mean “virgin.” Matthew is looking for connections between the story of Jesus and God's saving work in the world.

Whatever we make of this, the spiritual center of gravity in verse 23 is actually the name “Emmanuel,” meaning “God-with-us.” The very last words of Matthew's gospel are Jesus's: “Remember I am *with you always*, to the end of the age” (28:20). The point of the gospel is that in the teaching, ministry, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus, he brings and secures God's world-mending, soul-healing, eternal presence.

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