

2 Christmas– Year B – January 7, 2009 - Homily
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23
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I have always enjoyed Sir Francis Bacon’s line, “knowledge is power.” When I was growing up, TV was pretty informative, but I mostly relied on textbooks and libraries to do my homework. Nowadays, with the advent of the world wide web and general access to wonderful resources like Wikipedia, ‘*the free encyclopedia*’ children have access to all kinds of information – not quite the same as knowledge, note, but the potential is there!

Since dreams are mentioned no less than three times in this weeks’ Gospel reading, and are a recurrent theme that is only found in Matthew’s Gospel account – and no other Gospel, I wanted to understand a bit more about dreams. Here is a little of what Wikipedia says about dreaming. Dreaming is associated with the kind of sleep where there is observable rapid eye movement, commonly called REM sleep. This stage of sleep is actually a period where our brain activity is most like being awake. Amazing to me, especially since I only remember a few of my dreams, is that the average person spends two hours each night dreaming. Two hours! Some people say that they don’t dream, but that is probably because they don’t remember their dreams. There are even different types of dreams, one of which is a prophetic dream that confirms, comforts, warns or gives the dreamer direction from God. As much as God can use our dreams to contact us in this way, it is important that we use prayerful discernment when trying to understand the meaning of a dream or series of dreams.

Who knows for sure, but I can’t help thinking that God has found Joseph, Mary’s fiancé as a particularly good candidate for communication through dreams. Earlier in Matthew, Joseph was told to take Mary as his wife, despite the fact that she is pregnant with Jesus. And now, Joseph receives a clear direction from God to protect the lives of the baby Jesus and his mother, Mary by fleeing to Egypt. There is a portion of the Gospel excluded from tonight’s reading, which is also relevant to our understanding why God would send this new family to Egypt. The wise men mentioned in the first line unfortunately visited with King Herod on their way to Bethlehem, and let slip that the real King of the Jews had been born. Not such a wise move, because Herod was so paranoid and violent that he could not stand to think that he had a rival for his throne. The point is that Herod called himself the king of the Jews, but God was not fooled into agreeing with that self-appointed title. Predictably, Herod chooses violence to try and rid the world of his rival. Herod doesn’t seek out Jesus specifically, but orders the massacre of all male children under two years of age, in the region. The slaughter of the innocents, as this event would be called, achieved nothing but to confirm Herod as the tyrant and murderer he was.

Nonetheless, our Gospeler has a good explanation as to why Jesus must live in Egypt for a while, and quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures to confirm that God’s prophecy is fulfilled, and that God is directing the steps of our Savior, and His earthly family to keep them safe, but also for another reason. Matthew is certainly aware of how his words will resonate in the minds and hearts of his audience. By all accounts, Egypt is significant in the history of the Israelites! The resemblance to Moses being saved by his quick thinking mother during a time when all Hebrew baby boys were also being killed by order of the Pharaoh of Egypt is unmistakable. Moses will of course, grow up to lead the Israelites out of Egypt towards the Promised Land in the great Exodus event of Jewish history. And what, we are invited to ask ourselves, will Jesus grow up to be and do having been miraculously born, and then saved from death at Herod’s command through the gift of a prophetic dream to Joseph? Jesus: God’s son born in Bethlehem; called out of Egypt; and to be called a Nazorean.

As any prophetic dream should, it has inspired movement in the dreamer. The faithful and obedient Joseph and Jesus' mother, Mary, protect the life of our Savior using the knowledge learned by God's gracious gift. The movement is not always a physical relocation, but frequently a quiet spiritual movement within our souls that has brought us to a new place in our relationships with God or with one another. There have been other dreamers in history. I'm sure that by now you have been thinking about Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, as a modern-day remembrance of the power of all kinds of God-inspired dreaming. He too evokes the image of Moses surveying the Promised Land. He too leads a kind of revolution that liberates another group of exiles from slavery and oppression, right here in America. Just as for Moses and Joseph, as any call from God should, it inspires movement in the one called. In fact, God has never stopped talking to us in all kinds of ways. As in the case of Martin Luther King, God will continue to speak through the voice of His chosen and gifted prophets and evangelists. God also speaks to us in language and symbol, in dreams and in waking life. God speaks to us through others in what we hear, read, and see, and invites each of us to consider how He is still speaking to us today, and throughout our lives. Do you have the occasional or frequent highly vivid dreams that stay with you for months or years? That may be God speaking to you. Do you hear the same phrase several times in a few short days on the lips of different people you meet? Perhaps God is trying to tell you something. Knowledge is power, but it does require prayer and discernment to understand God's will in whatever way He has chosen to touch our hearts. Since knowledge is power, let each of us consider how God has empowered us. That is something we can all offer to God in prayer.

Amen.