

December 22, 2019 4th Sunday of Advent
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

[Washington Post om 12-19-19: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/12/19/we-are-our-ancestors-wildest-dreams-photo-black-medical-students-former-slave-cabin-sends-message-progress/>]

God Makes a Way

God's beloved, grace to you, and peace, from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Before we go any further today, it's important to notice what we didn't hear this morning.

Our Gospel this morning starts at chapter 1, verse 18.

What we didn't read are those 17 verses before today's gospel reading... it's all genealogy.

Name after name, generation after generation,

Matthew methodically provides his listeners with a list of the generations

linking Abraham back in Genesis,

all the way down the line to the shepherd boy, David, who becomes King David.

And then it continues from King David, more generations down the line, to the Messiah, to Jesus.

It's truly a list of ancestors, nearly all men, often with hard names, tempting to gloss over.

But look more closely and you'll notice amongst these men, four women sprinkled in: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and, finally a fifth: Mary.

With their stories and all the rest, a picture emerges that often includes quiet and not so quiet scandal, and righteousness, and deep trust.

For life gets complicated, and they make a way, God makes a way.

Those 17 verses lead up to today's reading from Matthew.

Another potential scandal is brewing: Joseph's betrothed, Mary, is pregnant.

The culture of the time, the religious institutions of the day... Joseph knows them well.

This isn't how it's supposed to be and Joseph, heartbroken, probably angry and confused, caught in the tension, Joseph is making plans.

But then comes Joseph's dream,

then comes the angel of the Lord,

then comes the promise, again—Do not be afraid,

then come the instructions, the name, the background, for God makes a way.

"We are our ancestors' wildest dreams."

That's the quote I've been mulling over this week.

Over the years I've seen it pinned up on bulletin boards, mostly to convey black pride.

This week it showed up in the news and across social media.

The quote was tweeted along with a picture of 15 black medical students from Tulane University.

This group, all in their crisp white coats, is posing at the Whitney Plantation in Louisiana.

One writes, "We are our ancestors' wildest dreams" ... and then he goes on describing the photo,

"In the background, an original slave quarter," with a rough wood house, grayed with age.

"In the foreground, original descendants of slaves and medical students."

It's a powerful photo, intense, brimming with history and potential, stark in its resolve.

One of the students writes, "I think you could see that [resolve] in our faces in the photo,

that we knew very well that we're standing here

and doing our best to embody the resilience of our ancestors...

standing here doing our best to show that we are here, and we aren't going anywhere."

"We are our ancestors' wildest dreams."

It turns out that Jesus is his ancestors' wildest dream.

Matthew's lineage in those first 17 verses takes us down that path, step by step, generation by generation.

Jesus is the prophets' wildest dream.

Jesus is God's wildest dream for the world.

Dear friends, don't think that we're disconnected from this story, we're in this lineage.

And, frankly you are your ancestors' wildest dreams, and God's wildest dream, too.

Our gospel reading this morning is Matthew's version of the story, his version of the dream.

As a little sidebar, a mini Bible study, let me say just a few words about the other gospels.

In Luke's gospel we find the rendition of the story that we'll hear on Christmas Eve:

"In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus..." Sound familiar?

It's replete with shepherds and angels and a manger stall.

Luke leads up to that natal story with an angel coming to Mary: "You shall bear a child,"

and a very familiar angel promise: "Do not be afraid"

After some good questions, Mary sings her song of justice, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

That's how Luke tells the liberation story.

Where Matthew centers Joseph, Luke centers Mary.

Mark's gospel, now, doesn't include anything about babies or shepherds, about Mary and Joseph, nothing at all.

Mark instead centers an adult John the Baptist preparing the way for an adult Jesus.

Finally, John's version is completely different.

It's John's Gospel that congregations read when they gather for worship on Christmas morning.

"In the beginning was the word."

It's a different take, focused not on the baby Jesus, but on the Word, the *logos*.

(In the 10:30 service...) Our Gospel acclamation that we just sang, back and forth with Zach?

That acclamation gives voice to John's version of the gospel.

I wanted to mention this because, isn't it interesting, that as the canon becomes the canon,

as the Bible becomes the Bible,

the church didn't find a way to align these different stories into one?

The church didn't silence one version and center another.

And isn't it interesting, isn't it a powerful, comforting, beautiful thing that truth shows up differently to each of the characters—to Mary with her gentle and fierce liberation, to Joseph in that dream trying to do right, to the shepherds, to David?

God shows up, making a way, making the way that we need.

I do some of my best praying when I'm walking in the early morning.

The prayer that I found myself praying this week was short, as much a plea as anything: **God, make a way.**

Make a way in the pain and the waiting and the not knowing.

Make a way where the divisions seem so deep and the values being espoused seem so counter.

Make a way in our families, in our relationships when old patterns have worn deep ruts.

Make a way in the dim night when our minds are most open and your dreams have free rein.

Make a way, God.

Sometimes God makes a way and opens the Red Sea.

Most often, though, God responds to our prayers and makes a way opening our hearts.

That's what God did for Joseph and his beloved Mary.

God opens our imaginations to new possibilities.

God opens treasure troves of patience when we thought we'd run out and should maybe just give up.

God opens our resilience, our strength, our bravery.

That's what I see in those Tulane students.

Not simply bravery to do hard things like venture into med school.

But courage and bravery to bring their own identity, their ancestors, their dreams, their hopes,
their fears, their God-given callings...
to that symbolic space at the plantation, and then to share that so very publicly.

We are our ancestors' wildest dreams.

On Friday, along with some of you, Jane and I attended a gathering to celebrate the work of one of
ISAIAH's faith based community organizers named Catalina Morales Bahena.

Catalina has led the work on sanctuary and immigration at ISAIAH and really in the state, and she was a
key leader for us as we became a Sanctuary Congregation nearly 3 years ago.

Catalina is moving on to other leadership.

The microphone was passed around, many, many shared stories and gratitude for Catalin's works.

Another Latina, who had been invited into organizing by Catalina, told the story of how Catalina had
encouraged her.

How profoundly important it was to have another person with dark curly hair,

another person with two last names,

another person who really understood her particular background and experience.

She said, Catalina told me: This is how God works.

Dear friends in Christ, generation by generation, conversation by conversation, dream by dream,

God makes a way.

This is how God works... at Christmas, and in every season, every time.

That is good news. Amen.