

Sermon – Matthew 1:18-25
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Grace Lutheran Church
4 Advent – Year A
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“Dreams in the Darkness”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The darkness feel like a dangerous place. This is certainly true for me physically. My shins are nearly constantly bruised and battered because the furniture is never where I think it is when I’m walking around at night. Left to my own devices in the dark, I’m constantly running into things. It’s hard to see the path forward. But it’s also true for me spiritually, emotionally. In the darkness, my mind spins and my spirit wavers. I think the worst, or feel overwhelmed, or imagine entirely unhelpful ways to respond to difficult situations. Again, left to my own devices, I’m constantly running into things. It’s hard to see the path forward. Maybe this is why little children often fear the darkness, because they struggle to trust what they cannot see. Maybe that’s why we’ve created a modern world in which little lights are ever present. For that matter, maybe it’s why we, in sinful stupidity, invented the sin of racism, pretending that light is better than dark. Darkness, we imagine, is to be shunned and avoided however we can. But can it be, perhaps, that it is in the darkness that we can most clearly see?
2. Joseph finds himself in a difficult position. He is engaged to Mary. Betrothed, really, as you’ll recall from older translations. And the difference is not unimportant. To be betrothed was to have a relationship with legal standing. Breaking off an engagement in our day creates all sorts of problems, of course. You’ll likely not get those deposits back, and where now will you

wear those fancy clothes? But if ending such a relationship is the right thing to do, it can be done without much fuss. A betrothed couple in year zero couldn't just call it off. While they had not yet consummated their marriage, they were legally bound to one another. A divorce would be necessary in such a situation. Joseph, unable to see a path forward, decides to at least be decent about it. He doesn't want to shame Mary. But Mary is pregnant and that is that. Joseph has run into more than the furniture. This, as far as he can see, is a dead end.

3. Sometimes the dead of night can be just the thing. I remember cloudless nights during my time of summer staff at Lutheran camps in Wisconsin. If there was no cloud cover, I would go down to the waterfront, grab a canoe, and paddle by myself out to the middle of the lake. I'd lie down and look up. Without clouds and away from the tree line, there was nothing to keep me from seeing the brilliance of the night sky. The stars, bright as they are, can only be seen in the dark. Living in the suburbs, where it's never really dark, my spirit yearns for the sort of night sky that can only be seen on the water, or in the country, far from city lights. My spirit yearns for the darkness. Because sometimes, that's the only way to see clearly.

4. Joseph's very reasonable human plans made sense but led nowhere. But God? God is the God of dreams in the darkness. Four times Joseph is visited in his dreams by an angel of the Lord. Four times the dreams change the direction of life for Joseph, Mary, and, eventually, Jesus. Of these four dreams, the first – today's – is the most significant. Joseph learns that God is at work in the darkness. As God moved in creation in the dark, formless void, so now does God take form in the darkness of Mary's womb, the divine gestating in human flesh. In this dream in the darkness, Joseph hears the most confounding thing: this child being carried by his beloved is the result of divine, not human, scandal. Not the scandal of a tawdry affair, but the scandal of a God who does not remain far off from God's people, from their suffering in sin and

death. The scandal of a God who would come near, and does so through this most blessed of women, of people, Mary. The scandal of a God who fully joins the divine to the human. The Christ who joins himself to us. This Jesus who takes flesh as a particular person so that all people, in all their particularity, can be saved from their sins, saved now for life.

5. In *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo and the rest of the fellowship prepare to depart Lothlorien and continue their hopeless quest to destroy the One Ring, the Lady Galadriel presents gifts to the companions. To Frodo, she gives a small phial which contains the light of Eärendil, brightest of the stars. With the gift, she speaks: "It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." J.R.R. Tolkien, the author, knew about despair. Orphaned at a young age, a survivor of the trench horrors of World War I, he was intimately familiar with the depths of human experience. But he also understand that, in the dark, we could behold the true light. One might say that when we strip away the blinking lights and glitzy glare, it is then we see the light that matters: Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.

6. Friends, this has been a difficult time at Grace. As if everything else in the world wasn't enough already. But don't rush out of the darkness. In the quiet of night, God comes to us with dreams. Dreams not of war, but of peace on earth and goodwill for all people. Dreams of a world in which all people are loved and valued, in which all people have enough. Dreams in which God makes a way where there once was no way. A dream in which the separation between God and humans is erased, for God is Emmanuel, God with us in all things. In the darkness, may you find clarity and know peace. The peace of the God who knows you and loves you. In the darkness, Christ is born. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.