

"Stretched by God's Dreams"

Advent I, November 30, 2011

Matthew 1: 18-25

Pastor Paul Rohde

Off the record, this may be a bit of a pet peeve. Advent is not about preparing for Christmas; it is time to prepare for God. I frankly think if we gave up shopping, wrapping, decorating, we might have the best Christmas ever. Christmas will celebrate God coming in ways that are so unexpected, unobtrusive, we miss it. Advent is a season to prepare in hopes that we may see when God comes in Christ.

My hope is that the symbols of Advent stretch us. . .so that we speak not merely of light, but of light in darkness, of God's power to bring light from darkness. The scriptures offer new righteousness; it's not at all a righteousness that says, "I've known all along I was right." But a new righteousness, engaged with the wrong—our own and our neighbors—and calling us back to new, miraculous life. Most importantly that the season is not simply a sentimental hearth and home kind of love, but a love that is engaged and active with all that is NOT lovely or loveable or life. . . and brings it to love again. Advent promises God's coming—for new life and reconciliation and justice. . .if we treat this is obvious we have missed the breadth and depth of promise. I hope Joseph's dreams and gracious faithfulness stretch us beyond the familiar.

Insofar as I know, the story I'm about to tell you is true. I believe its as true as any story that has rattled around a family for five generations.

My great, great grandmother lived, Marit, lived in the Gubrandsdalen of Norway in the middle 1800s. She was a peasant woman and, as the story in our family goes, was in love with a nobleman. As a peasant she was forbidden to marry nobility—or more accurately he was forbidden to marry her. I can't know if the next 2 facts in the story are connected, but I have my hunches. My great, great grandmother is pregnant and the next thing we know about her is that she's on a boat to America. She named her daughter, my great grandmother, Anna.

They came to Hanska, MN—where presumably there were other relatives or acquaintances to help them. At least there were other Norwegians and I hope against hope they helped them. In the course of time, Marit met a man named Hans Ellanson. They fell in love and planned to marry. The drama of the story happens when before they married the nobleman from Norway showed up. I should pause for dramatic effect, increased volume from the French horns. She married Ellanson. I can't know the quality of their relationship, but I know that my great grandmother Anna was given his name. . . and I take that as a good sign.

Do you hear some parallels with the Gospel--a surprise pregnancy, cultures that make that much harder on women than men, laws or customs that make it OK to dismiss the woman or worse. The language of the Gospel is so euphemistic, "put her away quietly" makes what is clearly a very serious violation. I hope you hear something more in these stories side by side. In both of them I hope you hear a

surprising, amazing dream—that life and love may be new again. In both stories, hardship is redeemed by characters whose faithfulness is generous, exceeding the right, imagining the new.

When I say I hope the symbols of Advent stretch us I mean stretch us beyond fear, beyond the givenness of the world as we know it, “of course you can’t marry a peasant woman.” Advent is a promise of God’s coming beyond the expected givens to make us new.

Joseph’s dreams stretch me and I want them to stretch our lives—and our understanding of religion. I’m stunned at how consistently I hear people equating faith and morality. I hear it both ways—I want to be faithful so as to be moral. . . OR I don’t need to be faithful, because I can be just as moral without it. Make no mistake, I am not against being moral, but God’s dream in Joseph challenges the limitations of that. Faith is not merely about *you* being right. I earnestly want to serve promise and power of faith moving us beyond right and wrong—in some ways the real power of faith happens when we fail our morals. Advent prepares us to look for the quiet, unobtrusive coming of Christ in these moments.

This quiet little story of Joseph is one of millions of places the Bible stretches that. If faithful living were only about doing right, the laws justified Joseph putting Mary away. But faith here is about God’s dream. . .of life beyond fear, of possibility beyond judgment, of new, healing, resurrecting love in a new relationship. The word religion comes from the same word as ligament, to connect. And the prefix *re-* means again. The power of religion is to connect again. The symbols of advent, as Christian faith itself, are all about living again. The whole point of God’s movement in Jesus is to engage an unjust, immoral, wrong world, unjust, immoral, wrong people. . . and reconnecting, making creation new, alive again.

William Green writes, Adventis about becoming available for something new. It's about not rushing from the dusk of our customary thoughts to the dawn of some preconceived possibility as though the night is too scary or depressing, and has nothing to teach us. It's about learning not to be afraid of the dark and instead wondering with an open mind. An Advent hymn says it well, "Watcher, tell us of the night, what its signs of promise are."

Statistically I know that I had 16 great great grandparents. . . because I know the story, I also know that I have a seventeenth the step great great grandparent. Until I put it in this sermon, I didn’t realize the irony that it is the only story of any of my great great parents I know is this. Richard Rohr says it is the genius of God, hiding power and transformation in weakness and shadows.

I could stand before you today and say I am descended of Norwegian nobility, but it would be anything but noble. I rather stand before you to say I am descended from a merciful step great-great grandfather, whose story alone has endured in my family.

Advent is about becoming available for something new. Joseph’s dream helps us prepare for God’s light, love and life to meet us in new, unexpected places. Amen.

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Midnight Madness - Our neighbors at Our Savior's Lutheran Church (across from GSC) are hosting a study/fun evening on **Reading Day, Dec. 15th**. The church will be open for study space throughout the building from **6 pm until midnight**. There will be home-baked goodies, fruit/veggies, chips/cheese and much, much more!! They will offer a meal of Boss' Pizza at 10 pm. **ALL FREE**. Go green! Bring your own water container.

“World Hunger and Poverty” is designated as the International Theme Year for 2011-2012. Minigrants up to \$500 are available to help students and organizations develop programming [speakers, workshops, events] that promote learning in this theme. For information, see <http://special.augie.edu/~asa/mini-grant/> Applications are to be submitted to ASA president Jake Bury.

Walk the Camino deSantiago in Northern Spain over spring break, 2012. The camino is one of the oldest pilgrimage routes in the world. The course will explore the practice of pilgrimage today and through the ages as we walk 120 KM culminating in Santiago Questions, see Pr. Paul or Sam Ogdie.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Wed. (30 th)	Roman Catholic Mass, 9 pm - Fr. Zimmer
Fri. (2 nd)	Morning Worship, 10 am - Dan Bock, Chapel Pres; Association Meeting
Sun. (4 th)	Morning Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul
Mon. (5 th)	Taize Worship, 10 am