

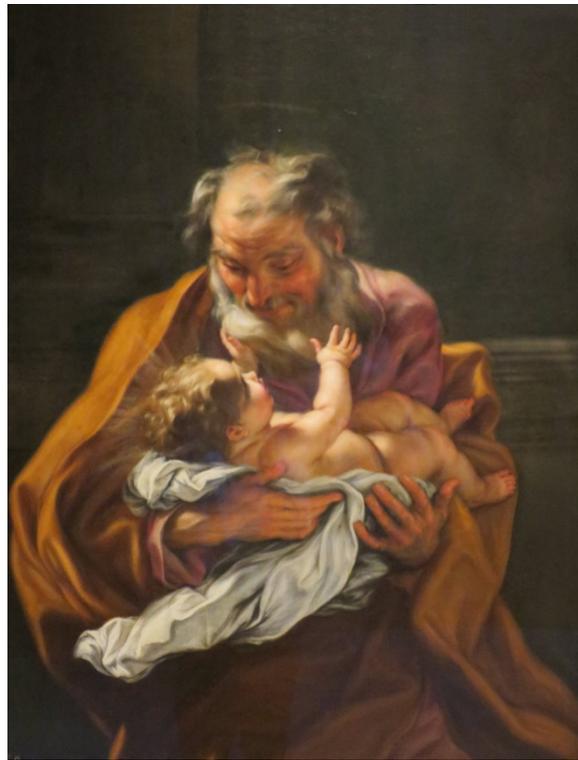


# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, JANUARY 2, 2022  
JEREMIAH 31:7-14; PSALM 84; EPHESIANS 1:3-6, 15-19a; MATTHEW 2: 13-15, 19-23

## LIVING THE DREAM



**Matthew 2:13-15,19-23** [*After the wise men had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."*]

About five years ago, my clergy colleague group gathered in Pasadena, California, for a few days in conversation with Richard Rohr. The rhythm for our annual gathering in the second week of Easter involves each of us checking in, sharing our stories, praying and eating together, and we pool our education funds to retain a theologian to challenge us. Rohr was working on his book on the universal Christ at the time, so we were treated to his own thoughts that were taking shape on the subject, which have surely informed mine since then. I know his book has found a meaningful place in many of your spiritual journeys as well.

The clergy colleague gathering also builds in free time, and Kathy had already scoped out the Norton Simon Museum which was within walking distance. On a lovely spring afternoon, we took in the remarkable collection, but there was one piece in particular that had drawn Kathy's attention. I would have likely missed it had she not pointed it out. Unceremoniously hanging in a corner of a large open room serving as gallery to all sorts of art was a Baroque painting by Giovanni Bautista Gaulli, also known as Baciccio. The piece is entitled *St. Joseph and the Infant Christ*. Father is holding son in his arms. Baciccio worked in Rome in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, when most of the art produced was of

religious content. Most of Baciccio's art hangs today in Roman churches rather than museums.

Two things make this particular painting noteworthy—first, that the subject was father with child, rather than the Madonna with child. For most of Christian history, Joseph recedes to the background of nativity scenes. His is a supporting role in the story. More on that in a moment.

The second noteworthy detail about the piece: Baciccio must have known something of fatherly love because he has depicted Joseph and Jesus gazing upon one another in a moment of mutual affection that speaks volumes to the relationship.

The carpenter's rough hands gently cradle the baby unswaddled on a billowy white blanket; the baby reaches up to play with the soft beard of his adoring father. The two are lost in their shared moment. Rohr speaks of mirror neurons that form along the experience of foundational love given and received between parent and child. Baciccio would have known nothing of that neuroscience, but he has captured the notion perfectly.

But here's a really interesting thing. Xrays can be taken of paintings to see what might lie underneath. It does not damage the

painting, but can speak to the artist's evolving idea. This painting has been xrayed, and something changed Baciccio's mind.<sup>ii</sup>

What lies underneath is a scene in which Joseph is looking outward, and is presenting Jesus in a more traditional scene. Jesus is looking up and back slightly, more curiosity than affection. There is no real engagement between the two.

But in the painting we have today, we are not "shown" anything. We are treated to the holy moment between father and son, lost in loving gaze with the other. We have a reprint of the piece in our home which now takes its place among the creches and Christmas tree.

Did you know that Joseph never speaks in the gospels. We are told he is a "just man," that he is dutiful, supportive, kind even. And faithful...but he never speaks. Shepherds do, the magi do, Mary does, but Joseph speaks through his actions. And God speaks to Joseph through angels who visit him in his dreams. Three times an angel whispers into Joseph's dreams, changing the world's arc forever.



In today's gospel, we are within earshot of the second encounter when Joseph is told to take the mother and child and flee to safety in Egypt lest Herod kill the baby. Joseph complies in trusting fidelity, and the purposes of God take root in time.

Every sermon I have preached or ever heard preached on this passage draws the connection between the Holy Family as refugees and the 84 million who are refugees today. We should see the faces of Mary, Joseph and Jesus in these siblings of ours, and the Church has

something to say and do about that tragic reality.

But today I want to bracket that thesis, inviting you to ponder that on your own time. Today, I want us to stay focused on Joseph, and his faithful way of listening, allowing him to come forward in the Christmas scene, so that we might consider what it means for us to be open to angels delivering divine messages for us in our lives. What does it mean to be faithful?

Setting aside for a moment all the traditional imagery for angels that is likely more diversionary than helpful, we need not picture angels as anthropomorphic figures with feathery wings with which they flit about. If it works for you, great. If not, set it aside. Angels are merely messengers whose charge is to intermingle God's story with ours. That they often come in dreams at night is important because dreams dance on the fringe of our daily lives, inviting us through portals of vulnerability into our most cherished aspirations and deepest fears.

Dreams lay bare the artificial defenses we erect in the course of convincing ourselves that we can do this alone—that we can do it well and with much grace. Dreams are mostly written in symbolic language, and only when we glean their shadows for such meaning will we come to understand their true potential in our lives.

But here is the beautiful point of it all: the angels are really delivering God's dreams to us, for us. Unless Joseph's dream is really

God's dream for Joseph, borne in trust that Joseph might just respond with courage and hope and faithfulness, then what good was there to come from it all? Without him mirroring the love for his child that prompted him to act as he did, how would Jesus have ever come to see the pattern of God's love for himself and for us all? And isn't that what changed the world?

The pattern is there for us, too. It seems to me that we must be willing to yield into the possibility that God might have a dream for us—for you and me—that God might just be interested in using you and me, and the wispy wisdom of our dreams, to change the world, too.

The great dreamers know this to be true—that in the creative chaos of now, God gazes upon us with a love by which we will find our way. Yes, God loves you that much...to play a part in the pageant of God's story—the same God who has promised to come among us. Emmanuel.

It's still Christmas, my friends. So let's live the dream, shall we?

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<sup>i</sup>

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%27St. Joseph and the Infant Christ%27 by Baciccio, Norton Simon Museum.JPG>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.nortonsimon.org/art/xray/F.1973.36.P>