

Sleep On It – Joseph and the Angel
December 4, 2011
Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:*

*²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel’,*

which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

Do you remember the last difficult decision you made? How did you make it? Every day we make decisions. Some are easy: Vanilla or chocolate/Coke or Pepsi? Some decisions are life-altering, for yourself and possibly a host of others.

I was taught to make big decisions by taking a piece of paper and drawing a line straight down the middle. You then title the left column “pros” and the right column “cons.” Once that is done, you make a list of all the pros and cons of the decision you are considering. If the pros outweigh the cons – well – there’s your answer. I don’t remember making very many lists like that. I think many of us do some of that kind of thinking in our heads or processing with friends. Even if I do make a list, I tend to rely on my gut. They don’t really teach you that technique in school – you know – the one where you just trust your gut instincts.

Some of us hate making decisions so much we try to get other people to make them for us. We corner all our friends and family members and ask them what we should do – with no real plan on whose answer should carry the most weight. Then when the decision turns out to be a disaster – we go back to those friends and family members and blame them for all our troubles

Procrastination is how some people make decisions – or should I say – avoid making decisions. Quite often if you put off making a decision long enough – it eventually gets made for you.

Some people don’t make decisions – they just react; while others override their good sense and make decisions based on impulse. “What was I thinking?” is the sad song of those who make regrettable impulsive decisions.

But then there are always exceptions to the rule: Like Phil and Marty Weaver. They dated a whopping six weeks before they decided to get married. That was fifty-eight years ago.

Probably the best advice for making tough decisions is “sleep on it.”

A popular song from my high school days was a song by Meatloaf. The girl in the song says to the boy, “I’ve gotta know right now!” To which the boy replies, “Let me sleep on it, baby, baby...” But then he doesn’t – which turns out to be a big mistake.

It has taken me a while but I have finally figured out that most important decisions aren’t all that urgent. Someone may think they need to know right now – but that doesn’t mean it is a decision that has to be made right now.

Earlier this year, national security and military advisors huddled with President Obama to make the decision to raid the alleged location of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. It was a decision that involved potential loss of life, possible military repercussions, and the reputation of the presidency. It was also a decision that had to be made within a sensitive time frame. To say “Go!” or “No Go!” was the President’s decision to make. Surely people were breathing down his neck for the final word. The president’s decision, for the moment, was to sleep on it. Sixteen hours later he came back with, “It’s a go.”

Depending on who you listen to – it was idiotic and weak to not be able to make a decision immediately – or – it demonstrated good judgment and wisdom.

Our scripture reading for today describes a situation in which a man has to make a decision of great consequence. There is the potential for public spectacle, humiliation, and even the loss of life. It appears he uses reason to weigh out all his options – and to the best of his ability he comes to a conclusion. But before he acts on it – he sleeps on it.

We are so bombarded with the sanitized, cutesy, picture perfect portraits of the holy family that we forget the very real human struggles behind it. Joseph had a gut-wrenching decision to make. By all accounts, he was a good guy. He didn’t react. He wasn’t impulsive. I don’t know if he had a “pros” and “cons” list going but he was definitely trying to make the best decision he could, given the circumstances.

His choice was to marry Mary or not marry Mary. If he married Mary, either he would admit to being the baby’s father (a dishonorable option) or he would be shamed by her “indiscretion.” Now on the other hand: If he divorced her with charges of adultery, he would put Mary’s life in danger because adultery was punishable by death. But if he divorced her without charges of a adultery, he could possibly save his reputation and save Mary’s life by shaming the “real” father into marrying her. That is the decision he settled on. He obviously cared enough about Mary to spare her life. It was not a decision made out rage or vengeance – although he very likely felt those emotions at some point. In any case, before he acted on his decision, he slept on it.

Science is starting to pay attention to what happens when we sleep. Scientists are starting to understand that being distracted from our quandary can help us to resolve it. Science has its way of describing what happens, how our unconscious goes to work uninhibited by fear of what could happen and possible consequences. Science can demonstrate how the more creative parts of our brain go to work when we sleep. Science indicates there are good reasons to sleep on big decisions – but what about faith?

Is it possible that going to sleep can be an act of faith? (sleeping in church doesn't count) What if Joseph laid his head down that night and said to himself, "I know what I think I should do – but I'm going to lay my head down and let go of it for a while..." Do you suppose he went to sleep thinking there may still be a better way – or some possibility he had not yet considered?

Some of us are so strong-willed and self-assured that the only time we have an open mind is when we sleep. I am convinced it takes an open mind to encounter angels and see the divine. When we finally go to sleep it is like giving up. It is like saying "I can't fight any more." "I surrender." That seems to be when God comes – when all our defenses are down and we are ready to listen.

Something decisive happened as Joseph slept. We are told it was an angel that spoke in his dream – telling him what to do. We don't know what the angel looked like – if it was an average human in his mind's eye or some spectacular vision – but we do know that Joseph got the message. Something happened, while he slept, that convinced him to change his mind. Something happened, in that dream, that gave him the courage and confidence to face whatever consequences came with his decision.

I'd like to think that Joseph said to himself, "You know – this is such a big decision – I think I'll sleep on it. I think I'll let God mull it over while I let it go for a bit..." Tomorrow is a new day – maybe things will look different – so often they do.

Horror movies make us scared to close our eyes. We know we are vulnerable when we sleep...but that's not a bad thing. While we sleep and our defenses are down, we become open and receptive to the likes of angels and the voice of God.

Imagine Joseph, a man who worked with his hands, doing hard physical work – a regular blue collar Joe. Now imagine everyone who knew him questioning his decision to marry Mary. Do you suppose he told them? Do tough guys listen to angels? He must have told someone...