

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper  
Sunday, December 19, 2021  
Fourth Sunday in Advent**

**“Where in the World Do We Find *Love* These Days?”**

**Fourth of a four-part sermon series entitled “O Come, Advent”**

**Christian Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25**



I am sure you all have had dreams before. I had one early this morning at about 5:00am. In my dream, I was in a junk yard. Happening about me was a huge storm with high winds. I suppose watching the news about the terrible recent weather event in Kentucky influenced my mind's eye. I remember carcasses of vehicles being picked-up, one by one, captured by gusts of winds. Of course, being the superhero I envisioned myself to be, I alertly dodged each vehicle as they seemed to strategically crash down on my previous positions. Next, as I moved-out of the junk yard, I found myself in a lightly wooded field. I then dodged electrical bolts like a running-back avoids tacklers. (My highly agile and perfectly

proportioned body and rippling muscles dripped the perfect amount of perspiration from my golden tanned skin - O.K. - I can see here my dream started to get out of hand ... Ah hem). In this field, burning limbs came crashing-down all around me.

I don't think you need to be a brilliant Freudian psychoanalyst to discern the meaning of my dream. I feel in last days of December 2021 that I am avoiding disasters, but just barely. I feel under attack. I feel vulnerable. I feel under siege. I am exposed to too many dangers, rapid fire, relentlessly forcing me to dodge, maneuver, cope, adjust, avoid, and hide. Climate change. COVID. Quarantine. Ministerial Report to Council. The on-going insurrection against our country. Afghan arrivals. The loss of Gisela's presence from me this week. The snow storm last night. Last week, Matt preached on 'where in the world do we find *peace* in these days?' What a good question! Today, I ask, 'where do we find **love**'?

One way in which the worldview of Jesus' time differed from our time is the importance of dreams. "Then dreams were considered a legitimate channel by which God revealed divine will to individuals. The church fathers wrestled with what to make of dreams. Tertullian asked how can one tell whether a dream comes from the devil or from God, and Synesius (I wonder if he always felt clogged-up, hahahahah) of Cyrene distinguished between the ordinary, unimportant dreams and those sent by God as warnings or prophecies. In our

time, Carl Jung named the critical connection between our dreams and our sense of God, and the difference between ‘big dreams’ and ‘smaller dreams’”.<sup>1</sup>

In our reading today, we are told by the writer of Matthew that Joseph had a ‘big dream’. In last week’s scripture, the writer of Luke focused on Mary. This week, Matthew focused on Joseph. And, of course, on Christmas Eve the focus will be on Jesus and his birth.

Matthew’s story has it that Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was “found to be pregnant” (1:18). I love that: “found to be pregnant”. Like, “Whoops. Look what I found!” It is stated in a rather nonchalant manner, is it not? Talk about a vehicle being caught by a wind and hurtling down upon Mary and Joseph. Joseph’s fiancée was pregnant with another’s child! If ever there was a time for Joseph to express some righteous indignation, this was it. Yet, Joseph seems to be an extremely kind and benevolent sort and he chose to gently and diplomatically ease out of the situation and not cause Mary any more trouble than she already had.

And now we come to Joseph’s ‘big dream’. The ‘big’ part of Joseph’s dream is that he was told that the child to be born will “save people from their sins” (Matthew 1:18). Now folks, this is HUGE! Matthew wrote his entire gospel

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Burt, “Emmanuel: God with Us”, *Seasons of the Spirit* (SeasonsFUSION), Alice Schaap Freeman, Pam Joyce, Katie Givens Kime, Paul Osborne, Amanda Osenga, Beth Waltemath, Barbara Wheeler, editing team (British Columbia, Canada: Wood Lake Publishing, 2013), 68.

with the intention of having Jesus fulfill various notions of Hebrew prophesy. However, and this is a HUGE however, there had been no tradition in Israel for a messiah who would save people *from their sins*. From the Assyrians, yes. From armies, yes. From bad laws, yes. From injustice, yes. From poverty, yes. Listen to the prophesy from Micah read by the Crutcher Family. “And he will be our peace when the **Assyrians** invade our land” and “out of [Bethlehem] will come for me one who will be **ruler over Israel**.” These Hebrew prophesies all claim the Messiah will be political; the Messiah will be an earthly ruler, that is a human ruler. According to the Hebrew tradition, nothing could be otherwise! To suggest a human messiah, or The Messiah, was anything other than political, to suggest that the Messiah was divine, was *blasphemous* (Luke 7:49, Mark 2:7, Luke 5:21, Mark 2:10, Luke 5:24).<sup>2</sup>

And this is perhaps where conservative Christians *may* have one up on me. Jesus is **not** only about politics!<sup>3</sup> That is true. My brother Matt, who preached last week, and I would be wrong to preach about a Jesus who was **just** about politics. Matthew stated quite revolutionarily, and at the time quite blasphemously, that Jesus “will save his people from their sins”.<sup>4</sup> By the way, the Hebrew name

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<sup>2</sup> And punishable by death!

<sup>3</sup> I define politics as ‘who gets what, how much, when, and how’.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Clark Kee, “The Gospel According to Matthew”, *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles Laymon (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1971), 611.

'Yeshua' means 'he shall save'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Jesus will not simply save people from their *external* political enemies! No, instead he will save people from that which fundamentally and *internally* separates them from God. So, Jesus was not an 'either/or' – Jesus is a 'both/and'. Jesus saved people from their internal sinful natures **and** thus transformed their politics! By saving people from sin, people are transformed within and thus the aliens, the orphans, the sick, and the widows are fed and cared for.

What made Joseph's dream blasphemous at the time, and what made Matthew's gospel blasphemous, is that Jesus was declared to be the Chosen One who saves people *from their sins* and in response they then transform the politics of the world. Now if we missed the 'Yeshua saves people from their sins' part, Matthew hammers home the blasphemous part by saying they shall call him 'Immanuel', or 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23). Mathew interpreted "Immanuel" to be 'God present **alongside** us in Jesus (a human) and **within** us as Christ'.<sup>6</sup>

And that answers the question, "Where in the world do we find love these days?" My friends, love is the babe in the manger *alongside* us and love is the spirit of Christ *within* us.

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<sup>5</sup> Kee, "The Gospel According to Matthew", *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 1971, 611.

<sup>6</sup> 'Messiah' in the Hebrew scriptures may have meant 'God **supporting**' if they were righteous (Micah 5:2-5) and 'Immanuel' may have even been a portent of blessing for the righteous *and* of the destruction to come for those who have no faith (Isaiah 7:14, like King Ahaz).

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"