



Advent Reflection for Tuesday, December 21
Janet Kaplan

You can listen to the reading and reflection by clicking [here](#).

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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

The Bible is a place of action. Acts, both large and seemingly small, lead to great changes and shifts in the daily lives and spiritual progress of the people of the book. God works his wonders of creation—and destruction. People sin, repent, are redeemed, fight among one another, are reconciled, defend against invaders, invade, are conquered, fall, rise, fall again. But it seems to me that some of the most dynamic shifts in the Bible occur not in action but at night, in dreams, or in the visions of the great ones, the prophets and the saints. Jacob wrestles with an angel and wakes with a sore hip and a new name which will be the name of an entire people. God appears to Solomon in a dream, saying, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Solomon asks for wisdom which, for Solomon, will never be far from the burdens that require it. Isaiah prophesies of that "dream of our dreams...with tiny features and dewy hair...the power of leadership and the weight of authority will rest on His shoulders." The angel Gabriel appears to Mary as in a vision, and, in a dream, God tells Joseph not to cast Mary aside, but to marry her and take the child in her womb—the Emmanuel—under his care.

These are not passive dreams and visions; they're as active and essential to spiritual progress as God's seventh day—the sabbath (during which He, who never rests, even while resting, rests)—is to the six days of creation.

These ancient dreams and visions remind me of this time of year, when the nights are their longest and much of the natural world dies back, as with the trees that appear dead but are only at rest until the returning daylight brings new rings and budding leaves. We humans know that rest is essential for health and that desires and dreams are often the first stirrings of action and spiritual growth. But, for many, the nights are not restful, and visions are occluded by nightmares, residue of the days' traumas or anxieties. These last two years have been extremely difficult for many of us who never imagined living through a global crisis and have seen their worlds upended. And, we're to be counted as the lucky ones as compared with those who've been the victims of generations-long genocide, crushing racism, desperate poverty, bombings, and political upheaval, my Jewish grandparents included. I've merely had to lay down what I'd imagined and dreamed as a younger woman and pick up the responsibilities of an elder, a woman with more caregiving chores and anxieties than I feel I can handle, a woman with tangled gray hair and a body no longer able to do all I ask of it. Still, these pandemic years have felt like a lifetime.

When I was twenty-one and just beginning life in my own apartment and with a paying job, a family friend phoned to tell me that my mother's ailments were my cross to bear and that no matter how far away I went or how independent I thought I could be, this would always be so. I seethed even as I knew. A mother bedridden with clinical depression, an absent father, no siblings: the family I'd been born into was my fate.

Then, in my early thirties, my mother died, and my father remarried: suddenly, I was free. I could work on my dreams, inspired in part by grief and guilt—but also by the pure joy of being free. I studied poetry, earned a masters' degree in fine arts, wrote books, won awards, and taught poetry writing to graduates and undergraduates. I started a small press and created book designs and cover illustrations. For the next thirty years, I did these things. I fell in love, out of love, struggled financially and mentally, lost love, fell again, wrote again, published again, dreamed again.

And now, mid-pandemic and in my early sixties, I find myself caught up in and overwhelmed by family responsibilities to the derailment of everything else. My father's protracted illness and death last July, my stepmother's Alzheimer's disease, my aged and disabled aunt, alone now and still grieving the death of her sister to COVID. My beloved partner bearing the diagnosis of and treatment for metastatic cancer.

These days I have a difficult time finding the good news in Matthew's gospel. Instead, I see the other side: Mary, unfathomably young, utterly vulnerable to her culture's mores and its punishment for unwed mothers—public stoning to death—and completely at the mercy of her husband-to-be; completely in others' hands. And Joseph: a man whose culture tells him what his rights are as a man but whose God tells him not to listen to that—not to abandon Mary—but instead to bear with her the burdens and responsibilities of raising this exceptional child. And in her old age Mary bears the grief of losing her child to a prison sentence and a torturous death on the cross. Where's the good news?

In his short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," the mid twentieth-century writer Delmore Schwartz describes his main character as he watches a movie. In the movie, his parents are the stars, enacting their engagement and early life together: it's his life up on the screen, or his potential life-to-be, and he reacts as violently as if he were the director and able to change the lines and tell the actors to do it all differently—as if we ourselves and all alone could direct our dreams, change our fates, wake up in different circumstances and start over again with different, perhaps pre-pandemic (prelapsarian?) lives.

The New York Times opinion writer David Brooks recently wrote, “The Bible is filled with characters who are at times overwhelmed with life and wish they could be rid of it — Jonah, Elijah, Job and even Moses. They are so central to the biblical story because desolation is part of the human experience, part of the bricks and mortar out of which we construct our lives.” But if they could, would any have chosen a different path? No, because God was with them—in them. Would Mary and Joseph, knowing the death their child would suffer, have chosen a different path? No. They were with God and God had created them specifically to do as He commanded. And on the night he was to be arrested, Jesus asked for the cup—his cup—to be taken from him. Then he remembered: God’s will, not mine.

The name Emmanuel means “God is with us.” The name comes from the same root word as the word “manual.” Meaning, by hand. God has made us and formed us by hand. God has shaped our seemingly small or large fates, our families, our bodies, our lives—and our dreams. Mine persist—my roles, my dreams—even as I rage and despair. In all honesty, I hardly recognize who I am anymore and, other than having the strength to get through another day, I’ve little idea what I want for myself.

Could this unknowing be an opening for God-who-knows to dwell in me more deeply, if I asked? Sometimes, when I reflect in the Bible on the sheer force of God’s will, a light shines in through the window, even now, even in this night. “Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding to learn your commands,” I read in Psalm 114. For me, this learning is first and foremost to surrender over and over and every day again to God. Because this God’s holy name is Peace.

Janet Kaplan lives with her partner Ethan and their two cats and the many wild creatures who grace their Brooklyn fire escape and neighborhood. She’s been a Holy Apostles member since February 2016.

