

## OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

Moses Baline was a *shochet*, a kosher butcher, by day, and on the Sabbath served as the cantor at his synagogue. He and his wife Leah celebrated the birth of their son Israel on May 11, 1888, but being Jewish in eastern Russia where they lived was a dangerous proposition back then. One never knew when the authorities would announce another pogrom, and move through villages and towns driving out Jews, taking lives, and forcing the survivors to flee the country. It was a nightmare. So it was that in 1893 Moses, Leah and their young son, dreaming of freedom, Israel emigrated to this country where they settled in to New York.

Life in their new land was not easy. When Israel was only eight, his father died, and he had to work as a singing waiter to help support the family. In time he realized he not only could sing songs, he could write them as well. His first published song was “Marie from Sunny Italy.” Eventually he wrote over 900 songs—451 of them bona fide hits. He wrote for stage and screen, for radio and for records. He was already a well established figure in American popular music when he wrote what would prove to be his most famous and beloved song.

It was 1940, and he’d been asked to write the score for a movie. It starred Fred Astaire, and Bing Crosby. And out of that score came what would eventually be the best-selling Christmas single of all time. Over 30 million copies of just one version have been sold over the years. The movie was *Holiday Inn*, finally released in 1942. The song, “White Christmas.” And the composer was known not by the name Israel Baline, but rather, Irving Berlin.

Originally the song was a bit of satire. It’s opening stanza poked fun at Hollywood: “The sun is shining/the grass is green/The orange and palm trees sway./There’s never been such a day/In Beverly Hills, LA/But its December the twenty-fourth/And I’m longing to be up north.” But very soon Berlin decided to eliminate the first stanza, leaving the refrain America came to know so well: “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas/Just like the ones I used to know/where the treetops glisten/and children listen/ to hear sleigh bells in the snow . . . .”

Almost immediately, its nostalgic portrait of Christmas became a reminder of home. Remember the year was 1942. It was a real tie to home, especially for the hundreds of thousands of American GIs fighting far off in the Pacific and in Europe. As they slogged through the mud, as they fought off danger and boredom in fox holes and jungles, as they lived through the nightmares of war, the dream of Christmas at home gave them comfort and hope.

It’s nothing new, of course. Dreams have always helped human beings make their way through the nightmares of life. Night dreams *and* day dreams. Dreams of all kinds.

**Our scripture lesson from Matthew is all about dreams. It is first and foremost about the dream held by the ancient Israelites that a Messiah, a Savior, would come and rescue their land from foreign oppression. But it is also a story about the dreams of a man and a woman who lived in that land.**

**Their names were Mary and Joseph, and they were betrothed, engaged, if you will, and about to be married. No doubt they held the dreams of home and family that most couples do as they approach marriage. No doubt they held dreams of life-long faithfulness, and living into old age together.**

**But suddenly those dreams had been shattered; suddenly those dreams had turned into nightmares. For Mary was pregnant. And Joseph, so goes the story, was not the father. One can easily imagine the anger, the hurt, the disappointment he must have felt. But he was not a vengeful man—and though he would have had every right to publically break off the betrothal and so humiliate Mary that she would have shunned in her own home, Joseph vowed to dismiss her quietly.**

**But while he is sleeping he is visited by an angel, an angel who tells him his shattered dreams of home and family are actually the beginnings of the fulfillment of the national dream of a messiah. This child Mary is carrying is of God, and will be the one to save the people. In fact, he is to be named, Jesus, “God saves.” It is that dream helps him make it through his own personal nightmare of humiliation and doubt. And so he relents. He goes through with the marriage. And the rest, as they say, is history. History that has had the power of dreams to pull us through the worst of times.**

**This Christmas season around the world, many, many face great nightmares. The nightmares of a war, and poverty, of homelessness and disease. In Iraq, soldiers like soldiers throughout time, long for home, and face great dangers. And the Iraqis themselves face a future full of uncertainties and risks. In the Sudan, civil war rages on, and thousands upon thousands face great despair. In places close at hand, in the cities of our own country, the nightmares of racism, poverty, drug addiction and crime, continue to haunt the sleep of our fellow citizens. And some of you face your own personal nightmares in this Yuletide season.**

**But the story of Mary and Joseph offers a ray of hope. For unlike most dreams, which fade with the light of day, their story tells of a dream that isn't just a sentimental reminiscence, but a real and powerful truth. For it tells of Jesus. It tells of the one sent by God to save all people, the one sent to save our world. And while we may not be able to resolve all the nightmares of life in this Christmas season, or the next or the next, we have been shown the way it can happen. We have been given a dream to carry us through the nightmares of life. A dream of hope and peace, of love and joy.**

Ed Hays, a writer and columnist, was a prisoner of war in 1944 in Stalag Luft IV, near the Baltic Sea. He and his comrades had been on what amounted to a starvation diet. They were ill-clothed, their ranks ridden with disease. It was bitter cold. Some of them had been beaten. Others were bitten by guard dogs.

When Christmas Eve arrived that year, they were given permission to walk the compound out under the stars. They were allowed to sing Christmas carols and to hold religious services.

Hays writes: "For a few precious hours, our freedom was restored and there was a magical feeling in every man's heart and soul that . . . we would survive this horrible existence, and that someday most us would return to [homes and families]." (*The Record*, 12-13-98, RO-3) It was that dream, that dream inspired by the One born on Christmas, that sustained Hays and millions of others as they endured the horrors of war.

My friends, it is that very same dream that can sustain you and me as well. And whether or not our Christmas is white—it can be bright. Bright with the hope that comes from trusting in the one who was sent to save all people. Trusting in him enough to live as he did. Trusting in him enough to take the risks of love.

Dream on, brothers and sisters, dream on.

Amen  
John H. Danner