

George had a dream.

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* George Bailey is a man with dreams. In fact, he's had dreams his whole life. Dreams of going places, places far away from his hometown of Bedford Falls. He's all ready to leave the first time when his father has a stroke and dies. When faced with the closing of his father's business, the Building and Loan, he gives up his dream and stay to keep it open. A second time he's ready to leave, when his brother comes home from college. The problem is, his brother has a job offer elsewhere—so George must choose once again between his dream and the family business. A third chance for him to leave comes with the war—but George cannot go because of a physical disability. Three times he tries to follow his dream—three times the dream fades.

You see, in Bedford Falls George's dad had been running a business—a Building and Loan. Geared to the working people in town, flexible enough to loan money to folks that the bank wouldn't consider. Giving the working people in town a chance to own their own homes rather than pay the high rents of the town rich man, Mr. Potter. And Mr. Potter wants nothing more than to close the Building and Loan. To keep the people trapped in his expensive, substandard housing.

So when George's dad dies it isn't just a mere choice between what he wants to do and what his family wants. It's between his dream and what's good for the community. Tough choice. But George does the right thing. The hard thing. He decides to stay in Bedford Falls, keep the Building and Loan open. Put off his dream until later, some unnamed time when he can do what he wants. Meanwhile, life goes on.

Joseph also had a dream.

In this dream, he married a nice girl from the neighborhood. She was from a good family. She had a good dowry. They would have a family, and while they might not live in luxury, well, she would make them a nice home and they would be comfortable. It was the dream of any nice Jewish man of that time—you grew up, you had an occupation, you were married and had kids, you grew old. Not so complicated, really.

Then suddenly, everything changed. The girl, Mary, came to him and confessed: I am with child. Pregnant. Going to have a baby. Not even married yet, let alone been together as man and wife. How embarrassing. She said she hadn't been with anyone else, but how else could this have happened? Only one thing to do. The law is clear: a woman caught in adultery cannot be a marriage partner. A woman caught in adultery must be stoned to death.

But Joseph can't bring himself to consign her to this fate. But he can't marry her either. The dream is over. Broken. Dead. But he is still fond of her; she is young and has only been trapped by a mistake. One mistake can ruin your life, but it doesn't mean life has to end. Then there's his own family to think of. The scandal would be terrible, for both their families. For both of them. Joseph is an honorable man, caught between law and feeling. So he makes a plan: he'll break off the engagement, but quietly, without making a public spectacle of the matter. She will be free to marry the other man, if he's available, and Joseph will be free to try to recapture the dream. To get on with life, anyhow.

Dreams can be good things. Things that give you hope. Give you a reason to get up in the morning, to go to work, to live your life. Having dreams involves looking into the future and being able to see something new, something better than what exists in the present.

But sometimes dreams don't happen the way we expect them to. Sometimes we dream a about a future and then for whatever reason the dream dies. Our hopes are shattered, dashed, broken upon

the rocks of life—you know, that thing that happens while you're making plans or dreaming dreams? But it's in how we face those disappointments, those broken dreams, that show the true measure of who we are. That show the true measure of our faith.

George Bailey has already faced three situations in which his dream has had to take a backseat to what's best for the community. He seems to have come to a point where his dream is to make a real life in Bedford Falls. But just when things are at their peak for George, something happens. Building and Loan funds are missing. And once again George's dream is threatened. Only this time, he doesn't make the right choice. He isn't willing to go to jail on account of something he didn't do. And he is so crushed by the breaking apart of his dreams, all of his dreams, that he becomes convinced that he's worth more dead than alive. Worth more dead than alive.

Its at this point that George has another dream, of a sort. Just as George is getting ready to jump into the icy river, an angel appears to him and gives him the chance to see what life would have been like if he'd never been born. The real gift here is that George finds out that the times he has overcome his broken dreams have meant everything to the people whose lives he has touched. The angel gives him the chance to see the real meaning to his life—to all our lives, really. The meaning that comes through giving of ourselves to others. The meaning that comes because we're willing to put ourselves and our needs aside in the face of the needs of others.

And that's really what Joseph was facing. Just as Joseph is deciding to quietly let Mary go, an angel appears to him in a dream. You need to stay with Mary, the angel says. Don't worry about this baby. He is special. Through him God will come into the world. Give him this name: Jesus. Through him all people will be saved. Don't worry about what people will think. The world needs this baby, and this baby needs you. Through the angel God calls Joseph to stand up for the baby that Mary is carrying, and Joseph answers that call. Just like George answers the call to choose life over death. Joseph puts aside his respect for the law, of all things. Make no mistake, he would have been well within his rights—according to the law-- had he gone through with breaking his engagement to Mary. He really steps out in faith and risks hatred and ridicule for marrying Mary. He puts aside concern for his own well being in order to shelter this woman and child who will be so important to the future of humanity.

When we look back over our lives, and think about the times that have been the most meaningful, my guess is that they are times when we have put aside our own dreams and desires, at least for a time, and answered the call of God to meet the needs of others. We don't find the real meaning by doing only for our own profit or benefit. God calls us to be the avenues through which God is able to work. The miracle isn't that God lived in the human form we know as Jesus of Nazareth. The real miracle is that through Jesus God is able to live within each one of us. The real miracle happens each time we hear and answer the call of God. We may be fearful, we may be uncertain of where the call of God will lead us. But when we open ourselves to God's call, well that's when we will find the deepest meaning that our lives can have. And when God's call becomes our own dream, we can fulfill that call in ways we never dreamed possible. Ways that we might not even understand until someone shows us the ways we have touched others through the grace of God.

I believe that people of every age, young and old, in every economic bracket and of every race, need dreams to dream, futures to plan. I also believe that when we open ourselves to God, and imagine ways that we can answer God's call, we will find a sense of purpose and meaning that will allow us to accomplish anything we want, whether it's bringing in new church members, or feeding a hungry family, or making our neighborhoods cleaner and safer.

May your dreams meet the call of God in your life and lead you to a new strength and purpose in your lives. Amen.