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Westward Leading, Still Proceeding.... Matthew 1:18-25

(Mat 1:18-25 NRSV) "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. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill 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." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

One hundred and seven years ago this month, after many, many attempts Orville and Wilbur Wright finally succeeded in flying an airplane and being able to control its direction. It was this latter fact -- controlling direction -- that was the real novelty, the real discovery; after all, any fool can manage to get airborne at least for a few seconds if he doesn't much care when or where or how hard he comes down. But this was the first time in human history that a human beings had taken to the air, come down safely, and had actually controlled the direction in which they went. As you might imagine the brothers Wright were absolutely elated, and they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: *"We have actually flown.... Will be home for Christmas."* Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message, knowing that he would want the scoop on this astounding story. The editor glanced at the telegram and then said, *"Why, that **IS** big news — the Wright brothers will be home for Christmas. I'll see that that gets in the newspaper."*¹ One hopes that the Wilbur's and

¹Cited in "Home For Christmas," Daily Bread, December 23, 1991, www.sermons.org/christmas5.html

Orville's sister politely asked him to read it again! Because he was not the first to miss the point, to miss the real news, that was staring him in the face, and he would not be the last.

We all know that feeling; at least I do. In fact Advent and Christmas may be one of the easiest times of the year for you or I to miss the real news in favor of what is peripheral! But, don't worry, this is not going to be one of those sermons that chastises you for missing the real meaning of Christmas. Instead I simply want to explore our scripture and the Christmas story on this first Sunday of the Christmas season and point out two ways that we might be reminded to read the real news, the good news, of Christmas, and to remind ourselves and those we love of what that good news really is

First of all, there are some folks who would tell you that the real focus of our scripture for this morning lies in Matthew's telling us that it was a *virgin* who conceived Jesus. I suppose that's understandable; because given the American fascination with sex in any form combined that all-too-human proclivity for drawing lines that exclude folks, unfortunately you will find no lack of preachers who will tell you that the real news, the most important news, of the Christmas story is that this was a virgin birth.

But, my friends, that is **not** the real news here. The real news here is that God becomes human. The **real** news is that an all-loving and all-good God decides to become **human**. **That** indeed was the real news for those who first heard the gospel, because it seemed so scandalous, so tawdry, so undignified for the creator of heaven and earth to make an appearance as a helpless infant, born of a no-name couple from

a town out in the sticks, who didn't even have the presence of mind to reserve a room at the Bethlehem Motel 6. This news was, in fact, a stumbling block, for the earliest Christian evangelization efforts. How could God himself *embarrass* himself by making such an appearance? And so many of the early hearers of this story shook their heads in bemusement: if this was really God, wouldn't He have appeared in a chariot of gold in the Roman amphitheater, or materialized sitting on Herod's throne?

Do you see, then, that for the early church and, I hope, for us the real news is that ***the earliest Christians resisted every temptation to make Jesus into a supernatural, not-really-human figure?*** The real news here is that Jesus is born of Mary, a real human birth to a real human mother. Because if this were not the case, then Jesus would have little to do with your life or mine. If God, through the person of Jesus, does not know what it is like to be fully human, then God can't really save us. God is irrelevant to us if God hasn't lived our situation. Here's the way one preacher puts the point:

God did not come into our world to merely share a few laughs with us and enjoy a quiet, comfortable life. God came into the world to rescue us from everything that damages and destroys us. God came into the world to save the entire human race from destroying itself through selfishness and greed. And God comes into our own personal world to save each one of us individually from going off in wrong directions and wrecking our lives.²

But God can't do those things unless God knows what it is to **be** us. And so Jesus was born of a real-live flesh and blood human being. ***That's*** the real news here; that's the

²Lee Woofenden, "God With Us," www.leewoof.org/leewoof/1998/12-20-98.html

wonderful news here.

There is also a second way that some folks manage to miss the real news of the Christmas story. “*Westward leading, still proceeding, following yonder star.*” “*Yonder star.*” The phrase always makes me wonder if the hymn writer was born in Texas, and wish our current hymnal hadn’t tried to clean up those words. But be that as it may, you and both know that a staple of Christmas-time journalism are those predictable stories about that yonder “star in the east.” The more restrained of these stories take one sort of approach and will seek to try to scientifically explain that star, going into detail about what the “star” could have been — supernova, a conjunction of the planets, or a comet, or something else. Others of these stories, though, go in the completely opposite direction, their authors seeing themselves as sort of the Woodward and Bernstein of the astral world, and will argue in minute detail about why the star wasn’t a star and couldn’t have been a star and couldn’t have been anything else either and concluding that the whole Christmas story is therefore just some sort of myth. We’ve all read both kinds of stories many times, I’m sure. Yet *either kind of story once again misses the real news*. Just as the real news, the real significance, of Jesus’ birth has very little do with biology and obstetrics, so too the real news of the star in the east is not astronomy news. The real news, once again, is that God cares about creation, that God is involved in what God has made. God is not an unmoved observer, but is intimately involved with the world. Again, for the earliest non-Christian hearers of the gospel, this was sometimes just plain scandalous and silly. For if you recall your Greek or Roman mythology, for example, you will remember tales of gods and goddesses inhabiting a

parallel world, little involved with this world, except to occasionally make a visit to torment some human being. The earliest non-Christian and non-Jewish hearers of the Christmas stories would therefore have often found this tale of a savior born to a woman, heralded by astral phenomena to be fantastic, quaint, and a little childish.

And yet that is precisely the real news here, the news that will change our lives. For the story of the star is meant to remind us that God is indeed involved with and reflected in creation. As one writer puts the point: *“Whenever I stand alone under the glory of a starry sky, there's a part of me that follows yonder stars to the very same God who made the heavens and the earth. In [an] age of astronauts and space explorers, the star is very much a part of any Christmas story for it reminds us that the wonder of God and the wonder of creation are [one].”*⁸

So those are the two pieces of real news this morning: that God becomes human in order to better love us and that God is and remains passionately involved with and caring about creation. That is the very, very good news of Christmas. And why does it matter to you and to me? Well, it matters because finally the very-most-real news of the story of Christmas is the little line tucked into our scripture passage: “Do not be afraid.” Here it is said to *Joseph*. Earlier, and as recounted in Luke’s gospel, it is said to *Mary* when the angel Gabriel tells her of the son she is bearing. It is the same phrasing that occurs over one hundred times throughout the scriptures. *“Do not be afraid.” “Fear not.”* And that phrase is the reminder to us that, like love, fear is not just

³Charles Henderson, <http://christianity.about.com/library/weekly/bldurerxmas.htm>

a “feeling” that happens to us but is also in fact a decision.

The Christmas story comes to us and says: Do not be afraid. But that doesn't mean that there is something wrong with you if you are uneasy, and worried and scared by what is too often indeed a worrisome and scary world. For I am struck by the things that the scripture doesn't say here. It doesn't say: “Do not be annoyed.” You are a whole lot more pollyanna than I if you can remain un-annoyed when in this season of good cheer and goodwill a driver who has misplaced his neighborly spirit cuts you off in traffic. And the scripture doesn't say “Do not be outraged at injustice.” After all, it is the teachings of Jesus Christ himself that have rooted in all of us the belief that all those things that divide human beings one from another are not what God wants. And the scripture doesn't say “Do not be perplexed.” It's a puzzling world sometimes, after all, and God doesn't ask us to deny the fact that sometimes we just aren't sure of what the right thing to do is.

But those are **not** what the scripture says. No, at the very **beginning** of the Christmas story, at the very conception of Jesus, God speaks a word “Do not be afraid.” And at the very **end** of Jesus' earthly life, it is the same word said to the women weeping at his tomb, “Do not be afraid.” And in the end that is the Christmas story, the real news, in a nutshell. Why? Well, because fear can too often diminish our ability to love, and fear constricts our capacity for gratitude, and fear inevitably exacerbates our sense of isolation, and fear makes it hard to focus on anything other than ourselves. But the real news of Christmas — that God becomes human and that God loves us no matter what — can and will remind us, again and again and again, as often as we need reminding, that though we indeed have annoyances and worries and perplexities we

can also with perfect confidence in a perfect God choose not to be consumed by fear. We can with perfect confidence trust that God is with us come what may. Do not be afraid, do not be afraid. Whatever it is that you face in the days ahead, the news, the real news of the Christmas story is that **God is with you**. And with God with you and with this church family surrounding you, you can face anything, anything.

For it is, on this Christmas Sunday and all days, the good news of Immanuel, God-with-us. It is the good news of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And for that gospel, thanks be to God!