

December 24, 2015 (Christmas Eve)

TEXT: Luke 2:8–18

TITLE: Hidden in Plain Sight

Just after the turn of the last century, two bicycle shop owners quietly made history, even though at the time almost no one could be bothered with noticing what they were doing. David McCullough's excellent biography of Wilbur and Orville Wright describes how these brothers from Dayton, Ohio in December 1903 managed to build and then fly a real airplane over the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, NC. A handful of locals were aware of their project, but when a friend alerted someone in Washington, D.C. about this great achievement—nothing happened. No one contacted the Wright Brothers for more details. So they kept working, testing out improved versions of their Flyer and doing short test flights back in Ohio. For an entire year locals occasionally saw their plane up in the sky until in January 1905 someone contacted Washington, D.C. again about the great potential of this invention. The brothers got back a form letter saying, "Sorry, the government has no money to invest in experiments in mechanical flight." For 2 1/2 more years, the Wright Brothers perfected their design, mastered aerodynamics, and flew hundreds of short flights until at last they were ready to publicly demonstrate their achievement before a crowd of spectators. On August 8, 1908—the eighth day of the eighth month of the new century—Wilbur Wright, this noble son of Ohio, this true American hero, flew over the heads of hundreds of amazed onlookers...in Le Mans, France! Five years after Kitty Hawk the American government was only slowly beginning to appreciate the significance of the Wright Brothers' work. Orville Wright would eventually make several public flights in Virginia later that year. But the inaugural presentation of controlled flight, something discovered by Americans, would happen in France.

Why was the homeland of Orville and Wilbur Wright blind to what happened right in their very midst? Well, the dominant narrative was that man would never learn to fly. If someone did develop a flying machine, it would only come from a brilliant scientist financed with lots of government money. But everyone knew that no one in America had a chance to make this discovery because French aeronautic experts were far ahead of us in this scientific field. Not only was this dominant narrative wrong, it made everyone miss out on what was there in plain sight all along. As the good book says, if only they had eyes to see!

This is too often the case in the fabulous-yet-flawed world in which we live. The dominant narrative says that the world is falling apart. The news media reinforces this every day, as they focus on bad news which increases viewership so they have an incentive to find even more bad news to tell us, feeding a vicious circle of negativity. Politicians and pundits tell us we should be very afraid. Look at Europe this year: two terrorist attacks in Paris, Greece almost goes bankrupt, Russia steals Crimea, 1 million refugees flood their borders. Look at the United States in 2015. There were lots of good things to celebrate like American Pharoah winning the Triple Crown, the women's soccer team winning the World

Cup, and the passage of marriage equality rights nationwide—but mostly we keep hearing about bad things: shootings in the AME church in Charleston, the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, the terrorist attack in San Bernardino; frantic voices saying immigrants need to be deported, refugees need to be kept out. We're told that we need to build higher walls, buy guns for everyone, stay home and lock our doors and seek safety hiding in the dark.

When that becomes the dominant narrative, God laughs and quietly tells another story. (Psalm 139: *If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' yet even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*) God laughs and, in our moments of fear, God's outstretched hand causes one star to shine a bit more brightly in the night sky. That star prompts wise men from afar to leave their homes, leave behind the dominant narrative, and look for a child who is born king of the Jews. When we are convinced that there is no hope to be found, God chuckles and has angel messengers appear in a dark sky, shining brightly enough to knock shepherds to their knees and make their ears ring with a celestial song about a Savior-child born right in their midst, in the neighboring village, lying in a simple wooden manger. It causes them to reject the world's dominant narrative—how they were lower class, unimportant characters in life's drama—and to run and see for themselves what had been there all along—hidden in plain sight—the wonderful, fear-eradicating, good news of Christmas.

There's a simple reason for all this. The big things in life can only present themselves partially and indirectly. You may say "I want world peace," but as soon as you look for something that big, you can't imagine it—your head starts to hurt—and you end up giving up or trusting the dominant narrative about why peace isn't happening. You say, "I want racism to end, poverty to be cured, children to be safe." Yet lots of things in the news and in life keep us from seeing what those big goals might actually look like. So we re-direct our gaze. We become cynical, skeptical, nervous and negative. We become captives of the darkness instead of children of the light. That's why God's response is to get us to focus on something that was always there, but which we had been too blind, busy, or afraid to see. Something like a star that suddenly stands out to us, even though it had always been there to lead us. Something like a child, this natural, universal symbol of helplessness and beauty that reminds us of the tremendous potential existing in every life. Something like a candle that when lit while speaking a Christmas prayer opens our eyes at last and pushes back darkness's shadowy power.

The "bigness" of world peace, spiritual salvation, ending violence, poverty and racism, cannot be seen all at once. So God re-directs our gaze away from the suffocating, negative message of this world that we might glimpse peace, justice, love and hope in small, immediate, important things. God knows that once we open our eyes and see these things, we can never fully go back to the other, darker version of reality.

In Deuteronomy 19, the law of God tells us to set up cities of refuge—places of safety where people can go when oppressed or falsely accused. In the early years of World War II, after France had fallen to the Nazis, a Protestant pastor in the little French village of Le Chambon took that scripture to heart. If German Jews found their way to his church door, he would help them, hide them, protect them; and so would others in his congregation. Dozens, hundreds managed to get to Le Chambon—receiving food, a place to hide, false I.D. cards, guides across the border into neutral Switzerland. They were not alone in this ministry of mercy. But like the other places of refuge, they were bits of light in a dark time—places where deeper, bigger virtues like peace and compassion could be glimpsed and experienced by people hungry for justice. Years later something similar would happen in America when an African American woman would refuse to move from her bus seat and a movement would be born—Rosa Parks' simple act of light would chase away the darkness of segregation and racist laws.

The Christmas story always has something new to teach us. It never grows old. It never fails to move us, heal us, inspire us, and by grace, change us. Why is that? Because the birth of Jesus Christ is one of those big things that can never be seen all at once. Yet if we re-focus our eyes even for a bit—we will see airplanes moving across the sky where mortals have never flown before and recognize it for the wonder it is. We will see a myriad of stars twinkling down from heaven, with one particularly persuasive one leading us into a future of global peace. We will listen as the discordant music of the night turns into an angel song announcing the birth of a Savior. We will move during a season of war gently rap on a door in Le Chambon, France and discover how to truly live a merciful faith. We will reject the noisy shouts of fear and exclusion and violence and make haste with the shepherds through the back streets of Bethlehem to worship Christ, God-with-us.

The negative things of life can always be seen in a single glance. There is no subtlety to fear, doubt, anger or cynicism. We are invited to focus our attention on something hidden in plain view that merits a glance every year, if not more often. A child—a meal of life-giving bread—a love incarnate—a candle lit against the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Thanks be to God for our Christmas story.