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"THE MOST BEAUTIFUL STORY"

A Sermon By

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## "THE MOST BEAUTIFUL STORY"

### INTRODUCTION

We're approaching that night of the year when we celebrate "The Most Beautiful Story Ever Told"....the story of Mary giving birth to the baby Jesus in the manger of Bethlehem. And Mary was "with child"..

Someone has come up with a list of "The Things Not to Say To Your Pregnant Wife". Let me share seven of them with you, especially for the benefit of expectant couples in our congregation. I wonder how Joseph would have scored on these things....things not to say to your wife when she is "with child".

- Number Seven: "I just finished the Oreos".  
Number Six: "You know...looking at her, you'd never guess that Pamela Lee was expecting."  
Number Five: "Well, they could induce labor, couldn't they? January 31st is the Super Bowl"  
Number Four: "Whoa....for a moment there, I thought I woke up next to Willard Scott!"  
Number Three: "I'm jealous! Why can't men experience the joy of childbirth?"  
Number Two: "Are your ankles supposed to look like that?"  
Number One: And the Number ONE Thing NOT to say to your wife is....."You don't have the guts to pull that trigger!"

Let's look once again at the Christmas story to reflect upon the tenderness of Mary and the patience and understanding of Joseph. This is a story unmatched in beauty, power and deep mystery. Three things to "ponder"...

### THE MIRACULOUS

Christmas is, first of all, about a young Jewish couple who experience the miraculous in their life.

In Luke's Gospel, we read that Mary is "with child", a child conceived by the Holy Spirit. And in Isaiah, we read:

"Hear now, you House of David! ~~Is it~~ not enough to try the patience of Men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord, Himself, will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son, and will call Him, Immanuel."

Now the "virgin birth" may or may not be a big deal to you, but there was an interesting article in McCall's magazine sometime back that someone put into my mail box. I try to read what's put in there...

It seems that after having two children, Fran Castro of Townsville, North Carolina, had a tubal ligation. She and Moe, her husband, had decided that their two daughters, Jessica and Sheree, then ages five and three, were enough. But the next year, Fran was sitting at the table when she felt something move.

"Moe...if I didn't know better" said Fran "I'd swear I just felt a baby kick." "You know that's not possible" replied Moe.

God with us! Think of it. What a n amazing thought...really...the very God of this vast universe...here in our midst. Yes indeed, the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King - the King of Kings. The Lord of Lords. And, amazingly and sadly, few who encountered Him had any idea who He was.

It takes my mind in the direction of a delightful story about a man whose name was William Lawrence Bragg, who at the age of 25 was the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Prize in Physics. Bragg was an avid gardener. His work and research took him to London to head the Royal Institution and reluctantly he left behind a beautiful garden in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a garden he had spent years perfecting. Life in a city apartment in London left him restless and unhappy until he found a rather ingenious solution to his problem.

Dressed in old gardening clothes with a spade over one shoulder, he patrolled the streets of a nearby wealthy district...Mayfair...until he found a house whose garden really tempted him. He then rang the bell and tipping his hat respectfully to the lady of the house, he introduced himself as "Willie"... an odd-job gardener with one free afternoon a week. His employer found Willie to be an "absolute treasure" as he went to work in that garden.

Until, alas, one day a knowledgeable visitor looked out through her window and gasped, "Good heavens! What is Sir Lawrence Bragg doing in your garden?"

In a similar fashion, you and I might be tempted to gasp and say, "What is God doing in that stable? Good heavens!" But that is the contention that Christians make and have made for 2000 years that the very God of all creation humbled Himself and took upon Himself human flesh. It's an extraordinary claim....Immanuel, "God with us"...a claim that is a stumbling block for many people, but that is the claim of the incarnation that we now celebrate.

HOW WOULD YOU DO IT IF YOU WERE GOD?

If you were God, how would you have done it? How would you communicate with human beings...without overpowering them and violating the principle of human freedom?

God's plan is brilliant in its simplicity. God would live among us and reveal Himself to a small group of common folk and they, in turn, would tell others of what God had done in their lives...and others, in turn, would tell others what they had experienced and as the story of God's coming is told over and over again - HUMANITY WOULD BE WON! Not with dramatic signs that would leave people unable to resist, but with gentle love. Really...how else could God reveal Himself in all His completeness except to come to us incarnate - in human flesh?

Don't ever underestimate the power of one. "And the WORD became flesh and dwelt among us". That sentence is John's philosophical shorthand for the familiar and down-to-earth birth narratives of Luke and Matthew. In each case our Savior is an INCARNATION...a human individual, a personality. Real power is always packaged as persons and it is channeled into the universe through the lives of individuals. Apropos of this truth is Webster's famous 1909 cartoon, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. The picture shows two Kentucky frontiersmen pausing to visit on a snow-covered trail. Bare trees stand gaunt against a leaden winter sky, as one frontiersman asks,

*Loveless power is powerless love!*

"Any news down in the village, Ezry?" His friend answers, "Well....Squire McLean's gone to Washington to see Madison sworn in, and ol' Spellman tells me this Bonaparte fella has captured most o' Spain....what's new out here neighbor?" "Nuthin' a-tall, nuthin' a-tall, 'cept for a new baby down t' Tom Lincoln's...nuthin' ever happens out here".

Friend, if we go looking for some colossal undertaking, we may miss it altogether. For the essence of Biblical revelation is that when the time arrived for the Creator to reveal Himself in some specific form, He did not choose a monument or a mountain or a star or a set of laws. He chose the medium of human personality, a child in a manger in Bethlehem.....the beginning of the "most beautiful story" that has ever been told, that mankind ~~has ever witnessed...that the world never quite remembers, but has never~~ never quite forgotten!

PRAYER

As we gather once again in these coming days to journey back to Bethlehem....and to marvel at a star shining above a manger and to hear the song of the angels, let us cherish the old stories and sing those beloved carols...and to "ponder" again the Glad Tidings they bring to us of hope and joy, of love and peace.

And then let us...in our own ways and in our own lives and languages and with our own imaginations and understandings of the faith join the chorus of praise that proclaims the greatest of all wonders....the redeeming presence of YOUR SPIRIT at work among us.

Let our voices rise up like candle flames, brightening our world and our city to celebrate a HOLY CHILD, born in a humble place, in a lowly manger and then let wherever we go or walk be a manger in which we find the spirit of the Christ Child re-born in our time, in our lives. Amen.