

Christmas Eve Meditation
Thursday, December 24, 2015
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Springfield, Illinois

Let us pray. Loving God, we thank you for your flight into our world in an unexpected and sacred journey on Christmas so many years ago. As we reflect together this Holy Night, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

As we gather to celebrate the mystery and wonder of the birth of a child, I am reminded of a religious debate that has gone on for some time around the issue of when life begins. Some people of faith believe life begins at conception. Others would contend life begins at birth. And still other people of faith would argue life begins when the kids move out and the dog dies.

As a church family we celebrate the gift of life and each season of the lives we are given. We delight in our young children's fascination of Santa's flight in a sleigh across the skies on Christmas Eve. As our children grow older we shamelessly and without apology hover over them as "helicopter parents," and when they venture out on their own we pray they will soar through life with grace and integrity.

I prepared my thoughts for tonight on an unexpected journey this week to Kansas City to honor the life of my husband Peter's godfather, Robert Reid, Sr., who was an early aviator, learning to fly during World War II from grass runways a few years before Orville Wright died.

Peter has always had a fascination with the Wright brothers, who built bicycles while learning the art of flying in Dayton, Ohio at the turn of the twentieth century. When David McCullough's book *The Wright Brothers* was published this year, Peter requested it for his birthday. He has been sharing highlights of this fascinating story with me all month. One week ago tonight, the Disciple Bible Study presented McCullough's book to the oldest member of our class. Wilbur Wright was born in 1914 at the height of the Wright brothers' fame and is their namesake. Serendipitously this gift was presented to Wilbur on the anniversary of the first flight in Kitty Hawk on December 17, 1903.

This book completes David McCullough's trilogy of American courage, determination and ingenuity. Beginning with his book *The Great Bridge* on the building of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1870 and his book *The Path Between the Seas* on the construction of the Panama Canal which began in 1904, the story of the Wright Brothers takes us from the furthest limits of the seas to the wings of the morning, ascending into the heavens, something unthinkable.

The Wright brothers mastered flight by watching and studying birds soar, birds of every kind by the hundreds. Their father, Bishop Milton Wright of the United Brethren Church in Christ, instilled within them a deep reverence and respect for God's creation. Wilbur knew there was something going on with the shape of birds' wings. Prior to the Wright brothers, aviators had glided and ridden the winds, they had captured the power of hot air and risen to great heights in balloons, and yet they had never powered their own flight with balance and control.

The story of the Wright brothers, and the wind beneath their wings, is the story of ordinary people making an extraordinary difference in our world. There were detours on their journey into flight.

Wilbur's hopes of attending college at Yale were deflated when the class bully hit him in the face with a hockey stick. A devastating concussion changed the direction of his life. There were mockers, doubters and stealers along the way. Among the naysayers were well-meaning church people who believed *God is great, the devil is real, hell is hot and God did not intend for man to fly.*

In no way did any of this discourage or deter Wilbur and Orville Wright, according to David McCullough, any more than the fact that they had had no college education, no formal technical training, no experience working with anyone other than themselves, no friends in high places, no financial backers, no government subsidies, and little money of their own.

What Wilbur and Orville did have was a supportive family, faith in their endeavor and intellectual curiosity. The Wright brothers discovered divine revelation in the miracle of birds soaring through the heavens. Tonight, we celebrate the divine revelation of the God who joined us in our humanity in the birth of a child to ordinary parents with no formal education or friends in high places.

As unthinkable as human flight was at the turn of the twentieth century, we take it for granted as a way of life today. Tonight, we contemplate the unthinkable in a story so familiar we also take it for granted. May we, like Mary, ponder these things in our hearts. May we, like the shepherds, listen to the voices of angels calling us to come and see the divine revelation in our midst. And may we, like the Wright brothers, seek balance and control in the flights before us, and may we not be deterred by the unexpected detours, the mockers, the doubters, the stealers and the naysayers along the way. *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles.* On this silent, holy night, by the grace of God, may it be so! Amen.