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Title: "Acknowledging God's Direction as We Begin a New Year

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Here we are already at the first Sunday of a brand New Year! Would anyone like to live 2015 over again? Too bad if you want to. We can't make it happen. But we can do 2016 differently than we did 2015, AND there's no better time to start than now! We can start now and make a brand new end.

Some honorable goals for the New Year would be: Goals concerning our church attendance, our faithfulness to prayer, our generosity & giving. Then there are the popular goals about losing weight and healthier living. One young lady, instead of making resolutions said she was going to TRUST GOD MORE in 2016. One thing I know – I want...I NEED God to lead me this year. What is required of me for God to lead me? Scripture indicates that God guides ordinary people. The text chosen for today is almost always preached at Christmastime. Certainly, that's been my experience. So it wouldn't surprise me if your only occasion for hearing a message from Luke 2:1-7 has been during the Christmas season. Having been here at Marlowe Assembly for 17 Christmases and having preached over 60 Christmas sermons, I sometimes find it challenging to share the Christmas story with fresh insight. What can I say that hasn't already been said? Most of us have heard the Christmas story told from a variety of perspectives.

I'm thinking that since Christmas has passed that we might focus on this Scripture with a fresh perspective and see some things in this passage we normally don't see because we're usually so anxious to get to the centrality of the Christmas story itself. I assume that all of us are concerned about direction in life, particularly at the beginning of a brand new year. This passage of Scripture tells us a great deal about how God directs people – ordinary people. Maybe you're here today and you feel like you've lost direction. Anyone ever been lost? It's not our favorite feeling. In fact, it's a rather frightening thing to be lost. Sometimes, as we get to be adults and begin to lose our sense of direction, the fright goes away, but it is transformed into something that might be simply called a quiet despair. We may not be outwardly shaken, but there is that spirit of disquiet. A sense of, "I wonder what I was begun for when I am so soon done for."

So, we come to Luke chapter two to these two ordinary people. I mean no disrespect in calling Mary and Joseph ordinary. True, they have extraordinary advantage of life given to them in that they would serve as earthy parents to Jesus. But in other respects, they're ordinary. This morning I would like for you to consider that they are representative of every man and every woman. In this passage Luke, we find them having God's leadership in their lives at a time when God is NOT speaking to them in a supernatural way. Through these seven verses, you will find that there is no mention of an angel giving directions as was given to Mary earlier. There is no mention of being led by dreams as was given to Joseph earlier. There is no record of a still, small voice speaking to them. Unlike the wise men, they have no star to guide them. And, they have no miracle of sustenance, no miracle to provide food or water for them and no miracle to open special Holiday Inn accommodations in Bethlehem when they get there. They are left flat out, so to speak, on their own resources, without any seeming divine supernatural intervention, on that journey that started in Galilee and Nazareth and winded its way 80-100 miles to the south, down to Bethlehem.

It's interesting how God works with His people. I've had times when God's direction was as clear as if He handed it to me in note form in His own writing, and other times I struggled and strained to hear His whisper. Sixteen and a half years ago, I resigned the church we were serving in Pennsylvania not knowing what God had next for our family. The following week, I attended Father's Day (1999) here and that Sunday the pastor resigned. A board member asked if I might submit a resume. After prayer and consideration, I did. Six months earlier I had said to my brother, upon learning that he was going to sell his house, "Let me know, maybe I'll buy it and move back home." After I said that, I thought, "How stupid! How could I afford to buy another home and why would I move home?" I thought at the time I had opened my mouth without engaging my brain. Six months passed and my brother put his house on the market. That was the week I was called to candidate as pastor here. On the Monday following the Sunday I was invited to be pastor, I told my brother I would buy his house. Had I candidated one week before, the house would not have been on the market yet. And because two parties had gone to get financing for the house already, had I come one week later, the house would likely have been sold. So we moved into a house with our last name – Lloyd – already on the mailbox! It seemed rather clear to me that God had opened doors. That house is just over 28 years old now. It's only had one owner before me. It's only been on the market for one week out of 1,489! That was the week we candidated here. Statistically there is only a one in 1,489 chance for that to happen. Again, God's will seemed clear to me.

For Mary, God sent the angel Gabriel to announce to her that she was to bear God's Son, Jesus Christ. I would that ALL of our direction from God would be so clear – an angel speaking face to face, but it's not. I would guess that there were moments Mary wished that God would have sent the angel Gabriel to the town square in Nazareth to announce how it was that she had become pregnant with child, to put a stop to all the wagging tongues in Nazareth. But God did NOT provide His angel Gabriel for that task. Many times, we wish that God would get more with it when we need Him to give us a defense against things that happen to us; or when it seems like He should come to our aid, and He is nowhere to be found. How does God guide us in those times? Mary, although being a Christ bearer, is like us – rather vulnerable. She and Joseph model what it is like for the people of God to go through a time of seeming abandonment.

Our problem with life is often one of perspective. We want to look at the segments of life we're going through with a microscope. And if we try to examine them with a microscope, to make sense out of them, it will be to no avail. Often we ask "WHY?" and we don't come up with an answer. I suppose Mary struggled to understand why it is that they have to leave Nazareth, their family and home, at a time like this. Why is it that things weren't prepared in Bethlehem for them? Why a manger? Why this difficult trip in the ninth month of her pregnancy, on a donkey, all that way to Bethlehem. Why? Why? Why? If you take each one of those segments and put them under a microscope and try to examine and make sense out of them, they don't appear to yield much, if anything. It's only when you get the telescope out and see all the segments together in one design that you begin to sense, "Oh, there's design to that! There's meaning to that! There's purpose to that!" It's the same way with our lives. We often get stuck because we so singly focus in, microscopically, on the particular moment of life we're in, and we fail to get out the telescope and see God's larger design emerging. Chapter two of Luke gives us the telescopic picture of God guiding these ordinary people.

There are many things that can be said about God's guidance of ordinary people, but we are going to look at just four of them. I trust these words will be helpful for a new year as we seek God's guidance. May 2016 be a year where we trust God in greater measure.

- 1. GOD IS IN CONTROL EVEN WHEN IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT.** Note the opening words of Luke 2, "*In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree...*" What in the world put it in the head of Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that would ultimately result in a cause-and-effect relationship – that somewhere in the outer, eastern parts of his empire, in a little town that he knew nothing of and did not even know its name, a town we know as Nazareth, a carpenter would be motivated to leave his tools and shop and go with his very pregnant wife to a city in the south called Bethlehem? This is the FIRST census since Quirinius was governor. Strange! If you were to say to him, "Because you're issuing this decree, you are positioning the Messiah, the King of all the world, to be born in his prophesied birthplace. Some six centuries before, the prophet Micah said, 'In Bethlehem he would be born.' Caesar, God is using you in sending out that decree." It would have blown his mind. But somebody got inside Caesar's head, and that's the point of Luke's telling the story, that Caesar doesn't just do whatever Caesar wants to do. Caesar does what GOD wants him to do! At that particular moment, God wanted Caesar to issue a decree so that, in a non-miraculous way, He could get Joseph out of Nazareth, down to Bethlehem, where he should be in order to fulfill the prophecy. The early Christians knew that God could have done something to get Mary down to Bethlehem in a more spectacular way. He didn't have to work through this indirect means of a decree from Caesar. The early Christians also knew that God was the real power behind Caesar Augustus. He was the real power behind the Caesar under which Christ was born. He was the real power when Tiberius Caesar was reigning and Christ died. God was still there with power when Paul was appearing in trial before Caesar Nero and Caesar Nero had begun the first persecution of the Christians. And when the New Testament canon is being brought to a close at the end of the first century, and Domitian Caesar is on the throne, smashing his way through the hopes and dreams and lives of the Church, it is still the Lord God omnipotent reigning. **God is in control of life.** We, as Christians, know this about God. We know that, if God does not act, it is not because He is helpless or because He is unaware or unmoved. But out of His own councils, He chooses not to act. And when He acts, sometimes what He does is so small that we do not initially even see it. God's purpose in His quiet activity was to bring in His internal reign. And the reason He does not work in more extraordinary fashion with Mary and Joseph, and with you and me, is that in the age to come there will be a manifestation of His external reign and control over all things, but NOW WE WALK BY FAITH. As the hymn writer has said, "This is my Father's world, O let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." That's what we Christians say as we come to this passage. For Mary and Joseph, and for our own lives, GOD IS IN CONTROL. Even if everything seems out of control to me, I stand back and confess and know my God knows and is in control.
- 2. GOD, WHEN HE LEADS US, OFTEN LEADS US INDIRECTLY.** This truth flows out of the first one. It was that

ticking, timing mechanism that motivated Joseph and Mary to get out of Nazareth and get down to Joseph's ancestral home of Bethlehem to be registered. Ever wonder why they waited so long? I wonder if one of the reasons why they waited so long to make the move was because Mary and Joseph had both had experiences, up to this point, in which they had been led by God in a particular way. I wonder if they weren't waiting for God to lead them again the SAME WAY He had led them in the past. Has that ever happened to you? God led you in a particular way and you said, "That was such a clear way that He led me. Anytime He wants me to do something again, if He'll lead me the same way He did last time, that's what I'll do." But God isn't committed to repeating any act twice. He may or He may not. I wouldn't be surprised if Mary and Joseph's daily conversations went something like this, as they held the decree of Caesar – Mary would say to Joseph, "Did you have any dreams last night?" Joseph had been led by dreams. "Is it time yet to go? Did God speak to you in a dream?" "No. I slept well – slept soundly – no dreams." Joseph would say to Mary, "Has the angel shown up again? Has Gabriel come around lately?" "No. Haven't seen Gabriel? What are we going to do? Let's wait until you have a dream..." "Let's wait until the angel appears and speaks..." Until finally, it was a critical time and Joseph said, "I've got to leave. It's time to be there. I don't want to be absent when you give birth. Will you come with me?" Likely Mary's parents were saying, "No! Stay here!" But without any means of DIRECT leadership, INDIRECTLY, they are pulled by this decree down to Bethlehem. Maybe they were aware of the prophecy of Micah or maybe not. Nazareth was built on a hill. I can picture Mary coming down that hill out of Nazareth on a donkey and looking back one last time, wondering if she was doing the right thing. Dr. Dick Dobbins, while talking about the will of God, said this, "There are two concepts of the will of God that people live with. Some people live with the concept of the will of God being a FORK IN THE ROAD, and if you miss one of the forks and get off on the wrong branch, then you're forever going the opposite way from God the rest of your life. You come to that moment and you make the wrong choice, and it's all over. You will never get back into God's will, if the will of God is a fork in the road." Another way of looking, however, at the will of God, which he thinks is a more accurate way, is that the will of God is a STREAM, a RUSHING STREAM. For a while, if you are disobedient in your life, you may step out of that stream. But, that doesn't mean you have to stay out of the will of God for the rest of your life. Get back in the stream and get going where God is going. Maybe you're a little bit behind where you would have been if you'd kept in the stream, but get back in the stream. Our life, as believers, even in moments when we don't have a sense of being led, has purpose and design. "He leadeth me, O blessed thought. O words with heavenly comfort fraught. What ere I do, where ere I be, still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me." We're all led by God if we belong to Christ and God many times leads us indirectly. When my wife, Diane, went through her bout with cancer, I struggled to see any good in it. It sure didn't make sense to me under the microscope. But stepping back and looking through the telescope, I see how an omnipotent God uses even the difficulties of life for good. It was during Diane's illness and surgeries, treatments, therapies and medical care that our daughter Jessica was influenced toward the medical field. Now she is Doctor Jessica Snoberger at Shadyside Hospital in Pittsburgh, PA. That might not have happened had her mom's circumstances been different. God leads us, often indirectly.

- 3. GOD WILL PROVIDE FOR THOSE TIMES WHEN, AFTER WE HAVE DONE OUR BEST, WE STILL DON'T HAVE THINGS ALL TOGETHER.** That's a great thing about serving God. I doubt that there is anybody in this room that totally has everything in their life absolutely all together. All of us can think of some loose ends. But this Scripture is giving us a marvelous assurance that God provides for us in that time in our life when we don't have everything together. Joseph heads down to his ancestral home of Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. By the way, as an aside, let's look at the beautiful symbolism in the town of Bethlehem itself. Of the three major occasions in the Old Testament where it's used: The FIRST time, it's a place of BURIAL – where Rachel, Jacob's wife, is laid to rest. The SECOND time it occurs, is in regard to a ROMANCE – Boaz and Ruth. The THIRD time, it is the BIRTHPLACE and childhood home of David. The three major events of life are – BIRTH, MARRIAGE, and DEATH. All three of those things had happened in Bethlehem. Now Joseph comes back to his ancestral home and he doesn't have it all together. He has no family there, evidently, even though it's his ancestral home. There's no aunt or uncle. He can't knock on the door and say, "We're here! Can you put us up for a few days?" No relatives. He's not told anybody he's going to be there in advance. And, he doesn't have an advance reservation at any of the inns. God will provide for those times when we don't have it all together. Can you imagine how Joseph and Mary felt? There are two Greek words used for "inn." One describes an inn as sort of an inn by nice standards – it has enclosures, a host, food and a nice apartment over where the animals are, so you can kind of relax and take off your shoes. The other kind of inn is a place where you bring the animals. You

might or might not have an apartment over it. It might be closed or not. You certainly don't have a host, and you don't have any food. You bring your own. That's the kind of inn that Joseph and Mary stopped at. And...there's NO room. They don't have it all together. There's no midwife to help Mary when she goes out to the cave where the manger is – a feeding trough for the animals. No midwife, let alone a doctor. It's so un-put together. Yet our inability to have things put together does not limit God in the least. That's the great thing that comes out of this story. It's that inability to put things together that allows Him to display His personality in a way that is absolutely remarkable. He wants shepherds to get in and adore Christ, so for all times we can know that the WHOLE WORLD is welcome where the King of Kings is born, in a place of vulnerability. There is no shepherd – no smelly shepherd that I know of – that would ever get inside of an inn. But out there, in the open with the night stars, all the poor and all the children and everybody who's been oppressed in their life can immediately identify with this story. Chuck Colson, in his book, "Loving God," contrasts the way the world builds their system with the way God builds His system. He said, "The thing in my life that is my greatest setback – going to prison – is the thing in my life that God has used most." It is when we are weak that He is strong. It is when we don't have it all together that God puts it together. That is a lesson that comes out of Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph are not to keep their eyes on the place they are in. They're to keep them on the PERSON that has come to fill that place. We'll always be in trouble if we keep our eyes on the place we're in rather than the person who has come to us in that place. I think one of my most difficult times in discerning the will of God was whether or not I was to participate in a clinical trial following my kidney cancer surgery. It meant taking four pills per day (costing something like \$8,000 per month) for one full year accompanied by many medical exams. It was a double blind placebo trial, meaning that it might be the real medicine or just a placebo. There were three pages of listed possible side effects. I had medical people who thought I should do it and medical people who said that they wouldn't do it. I had friends who said I needed to do it for Diane, Jess and my church. I had friends who said I shouldn't do it. My clinical doctor said I needed to revisit a sermon I had preached on getting God's direction. My family doctor, a Christian gentleman, said I needed to let the Holy Spirit lead me. That's what I wanted. I prayed and fasted and never felt a "yes" or "no" from the Lord. I was fearful that if I made the wrong decision, I was done. Death was one of the listed side effects. I had many a restless night and no peace until I learned that God was way bigger than any decision I could make. And if God wasn't finished with me – no matter which decision I made – I wasn't done. So I participated in the clinical trial BY FAITH. The doctor assured me that I could stop at any time. So my prayer was – "If this hasn't been provided by You for me, Lord, just say 'STOP' and I'll stop." The most important thing is that we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

- 4. CHRIST HAS BEEN SENT BY GOD INTO OUR WORLD IN ORDER TO BRING US INTO HIS WORLD.** The Lord doesn't set before us a strategy for living for the next ten or twenty years and then that's it. He has a strategy of living that goes way beyond this life into the life to come. Christ has come into our world because God wants Him to build a room for us in His world. And He's come to give us the way of escape. We're on a threatened planet. The scriptures indicate that this world will pass away and the lusts thereof. But there is going to come a moment for everyone, when we're going to have to let go. For some of us, it's going to be a lot sooner than we thought. But there is that moment, either by the Lord's return or by our death, when we will go to be with Him. The leadership of the Lord is not for this life only. He was born in Bethlehem, that He might be born in our hearts and that we might go to His place. He's come on a rescue mission. He stands now at the door of our hearts and knocks. I've wondered if the innkeeper had had any idea of who Jesus was, if he would have had the same response. If he'd have known that the King of glory was seeking entrance into his inn, "WOW! Open all the doors!" But he didn't know, because that's how God comes to us. He comes to us disguised. In a matter of speaking, I guess we could say that God came to you this day, disguised in the form of a poor preaching voice – mine. He has come in the simplicity and power of His Word. There's not an angel or a bright shining star. There's just an attempt at a witness, telling you that Jesus wants entrance into your life. The Holy Spirit, gently tugging away, is saying "Let Him in." That's all the evidence you get, other than His Word. His Word says, "If you let Me in, it will be marvelous and glorious, because you'll come to understand – I'll take you to My world."

"O come to my heart, Lord Jesus. There is room in my heart for Thee." I pray for anyone here today – young or old – that has never had a personal experience in their life of accepting You as their Lord and Savior, that as this service closes, they would open their heart's door wide and pray, "I want to ask Jesus to be born in my life. I want Jesus to come into my heart." I pray, Lord, for others in this congregation who have come to this service today feeling like they have lost their way – maybe fearful of what 2016 may hold for them. Perhaps a cloud of thickness has engulfed them and things do not appear as plain as they were days or months or years ago. Lord, in this time, when they

have not seen a miracle, or when they've been, so to speak, on their own, may they know for certain that You have never for a moment been absent from their side. I pray that, in this day, they would see You filling the place where they are. And although their circumstances may not give them any clue as to their direction, may they have a sense that they are not lost because You are with them. You ALWAYS know the way out!

We thank You for the trust that grows in our hearts as we follow You. And that in Your process of working with us, You come, not only to remove all of our sin, but to remove all of our fear, so that one day we may come into Your home, made righteous by You, purchased by You, pardoned by You, kept by You, made pure by You. Thank You for your great gift to us through Christ. Thank You, Lord. Amen.