

Angels or Bright Stars?  
Meditation on Matthew 1:18-25  
“In Terra Pax”, Bridges, Finzi  
TUMC, December 22, 2013

The peace of Christ be with us. Amen.

Does God keep his promises? Does God intervene in human affairs? In extreme experiences of tragedy people in *every* generation have asked these questions. But *we* ask them as a matter of course: science and technology have led to the *disenchantment* of our world. They have explained the material universe in a way that leads many people to conclude that there is *nothing more* than the physical world of cause and effect. This skepticism has rubbed off on us, whether we are believers or *not*.

All I can do today with this vast subject is to share with you two sources that have strengthened my trembling faith that there is *more going on* than meets the eye in *our* lives and the life of our planet. My *first* source is our text from Matthew; the *second* is Robert Bridges’ poem, In Terra Pax, set to music by Gerald Finzi, and sung this year by the Pax Christi Chorale to open the Advent season.

Let’s begin with the *unsettling* circumstances Matthew recounts surrounding Jesus’ *suspicious* birth. The story as we have it was written, of course, *after* Jesus’ resurrection. The author not only provides a legitimating genealogy for this child born out of *wedlock* but titles, like *Messiah* and *Emmanuel* that were given to Jesus when he triumphed over death. *We* know that the pregnant mother’s child is our Saviour.

But in the midst of the unfolding drama, Joseph *didn't*. He had simply been betrothed to a *hometown* girl. Being a righteous man he had not yet made love to her.

Yet *somehow*, she was expecting a child. *Good* soul that he was, Joseph was willing to have a quiet divorce that would not disgrace Mary. But the thought *never* crossed his *mind* that her pregnancy might be an act of *God*: that God might be fulfilling a promise through the woman Joseph loved! It took a *dream*, a time when his *skeptical*, conscious mind wasn't on guard, to see God at work. In his *subconscious* openness he came to see that there was *more* than meets the eye to Mary's pregnancy. Is it too *far fetched* to imagine that our gathering for worship *here* today, with its *echo* of things divine in the singing and praying and story telling, might help *us* enter a dreamlike state, an *openness* in which we let ourselves be surprised?

I'm not a *literary critic* or a *musician*. *All* I can say is that in listening to the singing of Bridges' poem I wondered if that isn't what happened to *him* – that he had a moment of openness in which he glimpsed things that were usually hidden from him. The poet sets forth on *Christmas Eve* in search of a *barely* audible, *barely* believable tale from long ago about God's *brightness* shining into human darkness. *Suddenly*, he says, "distant music *reached* me, peels of bells aringing... sounds *sprinkled* on earth's floor".

The Christmas pilgrim was inspired to somehow *re-enter* the world of the shepherds in the fields, fields like the ones *he* was walking through on an English moor. But in his crossing of *time* he was shocked to discover that, at first, these heroes of biblical lore were *no more*

*certain* about what was happening than *we* are. “Marvelling”, he notes, they “*could not tell* whether it were *angels* or the *bright stars* singing”, whether the sound came from *God’s* messengers or from the *indifferent* movement of the planets.

At this *very moment* of perplexity the words of Luke’s nativity *burst* into his consciousness with “*Fear not!*”, “*Good tidings*”, “*Glory to God*”. As long as the music *lasts* the pilgrim believes what he hears. The “*starry music*” and the “*angels’ song*” become *one*. His world is *re-enchanted*, like ours is when the warmth and familiarity of Christmas customs carry us along. And the music reflects this *wonderment*.

But then the epiphany evaporates and the poet is left “hearkening in the aspect of th’ eternal *silence*”: the music almost *stops*. As I felt the music coming to an end I groaned: is the pilgrim’s conclusion that *nothing* really happened, that *no* saving words were spoken that first Christmas Eve?

After an *unbearable* stillness the *stops* of the organ are *pulled out* and the music rebounds with the brilliant sound, “and on earth peace, among those whom God favours”. Amen.