

The Sunday Missive – December 31, 2023
The First Sunday after Christmas

Hymn 96 Angels we have heard on high

Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing through the night,
And the mountains in reply echoing their brave delight.
Gloria in excelsis Deo. Gloria in excelsis Deo.

Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why these songs of happy cheer?
What great brightness did you see? What glad tidings did you hear?

Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHWqj6gKS9g>

Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymn 27 Away in a manger

Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
The little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where He lay,
The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay.

The cattle are lowing the Baby awakes,
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes,
I love thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the sky,
And stay by my cradle till morning is nigh.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zVn0Kt9jYE>

The Collect of the Day

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your
incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may
shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and
reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and
forever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 147

Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God* ***How pleasant it is to honor the Lord with praise!***

Who heals the brokenhearted* ***And binds up their every wound.***

Who counts the number of the stars* ***And calls them by their names.***

Great is the Lord and mighty in power* ***There is no limit to God's wisdom.***

The Lord lifts up the lowly* ***But casts the wicked to the ground.***

O Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving* ***Make music to God upon the harp.***

Who covers the heavens with clouds* ***And prepares rain for the earth***

Who makes grass to grow upon the mountains* ***And green plants to feed all creatures.***

Who provides food for flocks and herds* ***And for the young ravens when they cry.***

The Lord has pleasure in those who live in peace* ***In those who await God's gracious favor.***

Worship the Lord, O Jerusalem* ***Lift praises to God, O Zion.***

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Hymn 89 It came upon the midnight clear

It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold:
Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven's all-gracious King.
The world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.

Yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
Beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
And warring humankind hears not the tidings which they bring;
O hush the noise and cease your strife and hear the angels sing!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYDa4Kht6Eo>

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

What Else Can We Do? Christmas 2B

In our various ways, we are all bent on encountering the essence of God's or Nature's attitude, intention and game plan for humankind. We want to be part of the solution. Or from a secular, scientific point of view, we can say we all want to be making sense of the relentless hunger we human beings have for something outside ourselves and bigger than ourselves. We want a frame of reference that includes satisfying our spiritual appetites. In order to have any kind of concord with our insistent proclivity to complex thought and our yearning for connection with forces we can't explain, we continue a worldwide,

history-long seminar/trade show/posturing debate about what's going on and who's in charge. In our family we've had several babies born recently, and, with another on the way, the wondrous inexplicability of life is very much evident.

All the thought and talk and theological scholarship there is and has been and will be about the nature of God's justice is at once justified and relativized when we consider the life of Jesus. Let's face it, if Herod had succeeded in eliminating Mary and/or her little kid there in Bethlehem, could not the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God have simply initiated the messiah program some other time in some other place, like Kathmandu or Cuzco or Kansas? We love this story because it represents God's perfect influence into human life. But we have to remind ourselves that the story's relevance only persists because it provides hope for our lives too. We live in hope that the goodness of Creation might be similarly, approximately, perhaps fleetingly manifested in our lives too, and carry over or be reignited in the lives of our progeny. If it happened in a grubby stable after an absurdly uncomfortable 90-mile trek across desert sands while pregnant and under the reign of a homicidally maniacal king; if all that could take place there and then, well, it's not so absurd or crazy for us to think we might experience a little hint, a glimmer of a reflection, an occasional moment wherein God's grace is active and apparent in our lives too.

The star behaved as no star ever has or could. Not only did it move slowly through the sky, but they say the Magi could tell what town it was over – which house in the town the star was over. But wait, if any star ever came close enough to tell whether it was over Morro Bay or Los Osos or Cayucos, the whole of San Luis County would be incinerated, along with the rest of the World. We know that, and yet the story retains its power.

It's easy in our own would-be democratic era to forget how revolutionary the idea was. "The biblical narrative," wrote the critic Erich Auerbach, "depicted something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people, from within the everyday occurrences of contemporary life." What is different is the novel and provocative idea that deity and humility might co-exist, that

whatever god there is might choose to occupy and enjoy a human existence, no grander than any of ours.

In our times, this biblical world picture is increasingly losing market share to what you might call the spiritual world picture, which keeps the theological outlines suggested by the manger scene — the divine is active in human affairs, every person is precious in God's sight — but doesn't sweat the details. It doesn't care whether the angel really appeared to Mary: the important thing is that a spiritual version of that visitation could happen to anyone — including us. Then there's the secular world picture, that keeps the horizontal message of the Christmas story but eliminates the vertical entirely. The stars and angels disappear: There is no God, no miracles, no incarnation. But the egalitarian message — the common person as the center of creation's drama — remains intact, and with it the doctrines of liberty, equality and fraternity, as the French put it.

Celestial signs were always said to portend the births of great rulers. Completely separate from Luke's stories about baby Jesus, lots of star and angel stories are about the entry into society and active human culture of a unique and transformative person, a political as well as a spiritual being, a great ruler of another kind of kingdom. It was foreseen by the prophets. It pertains to all humanity. It is God.

According to Philo, the African philosopher who lived around Jesus' time, stars are living creatures, but of a kind composed entirely of mind. A star can be sent down to do God's bidding, as an angel, like the one that guided the Israelites out of Egypt. Thinking of the stars as heavenly beings remained a mainstream theological method in the Church until the Council of Constantinople in the year 553. So, this account in the New Testament made complete sense when it involved angels; they were not fanciful departures from accepted ways of thinking. There are those of us today who still believe that stars are angels, and who can accept Matthew's account as a straightforward historical record. Others are more skeptical, looking upon the star as a literary device that proves how the Gentiles (represented by the Magi) were destined to replace the Jews as God's favored people; trying to convince us that the escape into Egypt and back was some kind of elaborate do-over Exodus. Gosh that sounds like an awfully (and unnecessarily) elaborate stratagem for the Almighty to cook up.

Matthew's story includes five dreams, four of them with angels. Call them what you will, divine intervention or our better natures intruding via the subconscious, dream angels are the instigators when hope intrudes into human lives, when good decisions are made and right actions commenced. For example, when Mary just says yes, or when Joseph decides to stick with her.

People who study dreams scientifically agree they are permutations of our thought processes that become perceivably active during lighter sleep. Our minds are so busy and wary when we're awake that these mental collages, commentaries, and improvisations have no chance of being evident. But when we sleep, the noise of the world and the barrage of imagery and the flood of plans and fears and strategies that occupy our minds quiets down. Only then is the field open for our inner selves to speak up and be heard. Whether our dreams consist of God's angels, or the musings of our better nature doesn't matter a whit. What matters is whether or not we pay any attention to them.

All day long we maintain and manipulate defense mechanisms and stratagems that life in this unpredictable and threatening world demands that we develop. It is only in the night, as we lay sleeping (or keeping watch over our flocks) that our dream angels can get a word in, hold sway in our often chaotic internal conversations, take the mic and speak to the room full of personalities we call our psyche.

The stories we revel in this Christmas, of God's humble participation in human life, of Jesus' parents allowing themselves to be controlled by faith, of wise and kingly fellers bringing gifts and defying the brutal king, all involve dreams. What is there more worthwhile for us to do than acknowledge the power of possibility that erupts when we make room for the dreams of our own lives, like the stars, all made up of what's in our minds and then some? Having seen what can happen when people who hunger for connection with God's grace pay attention to their dreams, how can we not try to do the same? What can possibly be better than contemplating our most mysterious and unconventional scenarios for a more just and peaceful world? Maybe we can even bring some of those dreams to life. That enterprise is our own gestation as the body of Christ.

We servants of Christ are protected by invisible, rather than visible beings. But if these us you, they do so because they have been summoned by our prayers. Here is one authored by Thomas Merton: Lord Jesus, assuage our blindness and activate our hearts, so that we may find your presence hidden in ourselves. May we unveil the mystery of Christ-with-us and work toward the true restoration of the whole world in your image. Let your light shine in our hearts so that we may always know the truth of your love. *Amen.*

Hymn 112 In the bleak midwinter

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
But his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
Worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him—give my heart.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBCYZ9jIjkl>

Hymn 115 What child is this?

What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary.

Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian, fear: for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.
So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh, come, peasant, king, to own him;
The King of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbvwwwTqeRo>

December Moon

Snow silence fills my head
After I leave the window.

Hours later near dawn
When I look down again
The whole landscape has changed
The perfect surface gone
Criss-crossed and written on
Where the wild creatures ranged
While the moon rose and shone.

Why did my dog not bark?
Why did I hear no sound
There on the snow-locked ground
In the tumultuous dark?

How much can come, how much can go
When the December moon is bright,
What worlds of play we'll never know
Sleeping away the cold white night
After a fall of snow.

May Sarton