

**The Spiritual Wisdom
of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
and Teachers**

Feasts, Funerals, and Weddings

Following Love into Mystery

John Shea



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For Anne

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Preface

Partnering

This is the fourth and final volume of the series *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*. The first three volumes focused on the Sunday Gospels for Liturgical Years A, B, and C and provided a spiritual commentary and teaching for each gospel. This volume focuses on the gospel readings for feasts that appear in every liturgical year, for funerals, and for weddings.

The format is the same as Years A, B, and C. A spiritual commentary is provided and a teaching is developed for each gospel reading, although in the case of funerals and weddings the commentaries and teachings are melded together. Also, since many of the gospel texts in this volume are dealt with in the first three volumes, there are directions in the commentaries and teachings of this volume where to find fuller and/or alternate treatments. For example, the reflection on the feast of the Immaculate Conception in this volume directs readers to Year B, Fourth Sunday of Advent. In a very few instances, for the sake of convenience, I have repeated sections from previous volumes and inserted them in new contexts.

The purpose of these four volumes, their method, and a description of spiritual wisdom is spelled out in the preface and introduction to *Year A, On Earth as It Is in Heaven* and the introduction to *Year B, Eating with the Bridegroom*. I do not want to repeat in this volume what I said in those two volumes. But since the first volume was published, I have been fortunate enough to have conversations with readers. These conversations have given me a clearer understanding of how these books are actually used and a greater appreciation of the dynamics between the writings and the readers.

One woman told me her thirtysomething son asked for the three volumes as a Christmas present. He was browsing through a small bookshop when he found them. Something about the commentary on the Wedding Feast of Cana intrigued him and he wanted to read more. She told me he works as a shopkeeper; and so she suggested I re-title the series *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers, Teachers, and Shopkeepers*. That got us both laughing, but it also reflected

the original intention. The intended audience was always “Anyone, Christian or not, who is interested in the spiritual life.” (See preface to Year A, “Writing This Resource.”) But what I really wanted to know was what fascinated him about the Wedding Feast of Cana.

The type of conversation I had with that woman is the usual way of anecdotal feedback. Preachers, teachers, “ordinary Christians,” and even some people of other faiths have told me they use the books on a regular basis and enjoy them. Most of what they said was general and complimentary. It is always nice to hear praise. In a strange retroactive way it makes the drudgery of the actual writing more bearable; and since all writing hopes to contribute to the well-being of people, it is always good news to hear that, at least for some people, the mission has been accomplished. Of course, the real blessing might be that very few wrote or came up to me after a talk to tell me the books were a waste of time and money and I was destroying the church—although that has happened.

However, when it was appropriate, I pushed to hear a little more from readers—“just exactly what did they find interesting or helpful?” I wanted data-based feedback. I always like to know what worked and how it worked. So, at my instigation, preachers or teachers told me in some detail how they used the texts in homilies and classes. I was fascinated by the insightful things they were saying, but I wondered how what I wrote was an influence. There were some lines of connection, but they were dotted lines at best and, in some cases, invisible lines. I found myself asking, in a self-serving way, “What in the reading led you to that idea?” One preacher even sent me a copy of his sermon. It was quite wonderful, and I was glad to have had anything to do with it. But I was hard-pressed to figure out how what he preached had any reference to what I wrote. What is the opposite of plagiarism?

The same thing happened with “ordinary Christians.” They told me about “bad theological ideas” they finally had the courage to leave behind, about gospel stories that came alive for them for the first time, about decisions they had made as a result of a teaching, about realizations that meant so much to them, etc. Most of these heartfelt confessions seemed right and life-giving. In fact, I took some mental notes because what they said was more real and insightful than what was in the books. There is considerable claptrap in literary circles about writers getting the readers they deserve. It seemed I was visited by grace, getting readers who were much more than I deserved.

When I reflected on this pattern of feedback, I recalled the distinction between “cause” and “occasion.” Something can make something

happen, and therefore it becomes a cause. Or something can create the conditions so that something can happen, and therefore it becomes an occasion. I think the verdict is in. For many readers, the ones who have deliberately or randomly contacted me, reading these sacred texts along with the commentaries and teachings has been an occasion for significant inner work that has had significant outer effects. How this happens is truly a mystery, a mystery that has to be respected more than explained. It is enough to know that the writing played a part, and it is a good feeling to be a partner in cocreated meaning and a fuller life that, in my vision, the gospels are passionately interested in giving.

It also reminded me of a progression of development, how we grow in spiritual consciousness upon "hearing the Word." We begin by collecting *information*. For example, we know "The Word became flesh" is in the prologue of the Gospel of John, and it is an interpretive key to the whole gospel. If we pursue this information, it will gradually become *understanding*. We will grasp how the eternal Word's taking on human mortality is an unbreakable source of human hope. We will be able to track the inner logic of the idea and connect it to other ideas. Also, there may come a time when this understanding will ripen into *realization*. This means the truth of the Gospel becomes our truth. It makes a home in our mind and we move to act on it. This action may be minimal, as befits a mustard seed; but if it is deeply enough "sown in our good earth," it will become a tree and have maximal effect (Mark 4:30-32). The Word has become flesh.

When readers realize the spiritual wisdom of the gospels in their particular consciousness, they find their own way of embodying it, an embodiment that takes the forms of articulation and integration. They find witnessing words and manifesting behaviors. Some have called this the emergence of the Fifth Gospel. It recognizes the following of Jesus is indebted to the four canonical gospels, but it also honors the creative living of each person who has realized some of the Gospel truths.

In the first volume of this series I acknowledged and thanked the many people who contributed to the writing, especially people at Old St. Pat's; Lilly Endowment, Inc.; and Liturgical Press. Now in this final volume I want to acknowledge and thank the readers who have welcomed *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* as a partner in the adventure of their spiritual development.

Feasts

The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Luke 1:26-38



Scratching in the Earth

A Spiritual Commentary

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."

Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In Luke's story Gabriel has made a previous appearance. Six months earlier he visited Zechariah as he performed the duties of the high priest in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Priest and temple is an appropriate

setting for an angelic visitation. Now, however, it is a small-town setting and the visit is to a virgin of transitional social standing, betrothed but not yet living with her husband. This is an unexpected setting for angels. On the surface it seems the angel has visited both ends of the social spectrum. Gabriel is present in the temple and in the village, to the priest and to the virgin. (See Year B, "Fourth Sunday of Advent.")

However, the priest and the virgin have something in common. They are both figures of longing. Zechariah's yearning is blatant. He and his wife Elizabeth, though aged, have been praying for a child. They have disposed themselves and are waiting for divine graciousness. Their waiting is over. Gabriel's opening line to Zechariah is, "Fear not! Your prayers have been heard." Mary is also a figure of longing, but her longing is more subtle. It is not openly stated; it is symbolized by her virginity. On the physical level, virginity means lack of sexual intercourse. On the social level, the virginity of a woman in ancient cultures signified nonattachment. She did not belong to anyone. On the spiritual level, virginity was two-sided. It meant both detachment from the world and commitment to God. This spiritual virginity was not always a separate state. It was a transcendent commitment that could be differentiated but was not completely divorced from sexual and social commitments. The longing at the center of Mary's virginity is both spiritual and social. She is committed to both God and Joseph.

In this episode the key to Joseph's significance is that he is of the house of David. God swore to David that he would build him a house. "Moreover, I declare to you that I, the LORD, will build you a house . . . I will raise up your offspring after you who will be one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me . . ." (1 Chr 17:10-13, NAB). This son of David, to whom God will be a father, will in turn build God a house. "He it is who shall build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever." This is the ancient prophesy that backs up Gabriel's prediction: "[The] Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary is not only committed to God; she is also dedicated to what God is building in the world.

Therefore, Mary's longing for God should not be construed along romantic lines that were developed in later Christian mysticism. This is not a love affair with God vaguely modeled after a man and woman's passionate yearning for each other. Mary is hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Later, she will sing of God's influx into her soul that causes

her to become a magnification of Spirit. But immediately she will connect this personal communion with social change.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:50-53)

Mary's longing for God results in a social transformation, a restructuring of society. The angel Gabriel is instructing her in how to translate this kingdom consciousness into reality.

Paradoxically, the virginity that at one stage symbolizes her longing is, at another stage, the path to its fulfillment. Spiritual traditions always acknowledge that it is God who builds the house. The Ultimate Author is the One who must be credited. Human hands are certainly responsible, but they must be energized and guided by Spirit. Therefore, it is not a matter of Mary having a male sexual partner, as if building God's house was a purely physical endeavor. Her question to Gabriel about "how can this be" is misplaced. It is a matter of learning how to mediate Spirit into flesh, of allowing the spiritual order to have effects in the biosocial order. How it will happen is "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." Predictably, Gabriel is putting the emphasis on the architect because what is envisioned is well beyond the solo work of human hands. In fact, it is impossible to try to do it without doing it with God.

But what does Mary need to do in order to facilitate this happening? How does she comply with the Spirit?

Initially, she must be open and ready to receive. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord." This is a further quality of spiritual virginity. Spiritual virginity is an emptiness that Caryll Houselander likens to the "hollow in a reed, the narrow riftless emptiness that can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in his heart . . . an emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water and wine" (*The Reed of God*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1944). But in order for the piper to breathe his song into her she must consent. In fact, she must go beyond consent, beyond mere acquiescence. She must desire it with all her heart, allowing her longing to unify her mind,

will, and behavior—"let it be with me according to your word." With this singleness of heart, she becomes the virgin mother, the symbol of uniting both spiritual and social commitments. She is detached from the world as it is, but she is attached to God and the divine energy to build another world. This virginal commitment is the longing to make Spirit into flesh. She will bring forth a Son who will build God's house in the world.

Teaching

In 1858 Bernadette Soubirous saw eighteen apparitions of a "small young lady." Although she never claimed the lady was the Blessed Virgin Mary, she was pushed by her parish priest to inquire after the lady's name. At first the lady demurred, bowing and smiling, but saying nothing. Finally, she said, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Commentators say that it is very probable Bernadette had never heard the name before. If this is so, it adds credibility to the vision.

During one of the lady's visitations, she pointed to a place on the ground and told Bernadette to drink from the spring that flowed there and eat from the plants that grew there. But Bernadette could not see any spring or plants, only muddy ground. She assumed the lady meant the spring was underground. So she scratched in the earth until some muddy drops appeared. She attempted to drink them, but it was not possible. She continued to scratch and tried to drink three times without success. Finally, on the fourth try, the water was more abundant and clearer. She drank it and ate from the plants.

However, when she turned toward the curious crowd that had assembled, her face was smeared with mud. No one saw any streams of water or plants. The crowd immediately denounced her as a fraud. However, in the next few days, clear water began to flow from the earth, exactly in the place where Bernadette was scratching. People began to drink the water and bathe in it. Many reported cures and healings. Although chemists studied the water and found it normal, the cures and healing continued. The rest, as they say, is history, the history of Lourdes.

The historical accuracy and physical facts of this story are open to investigation. But the literary form of the story suggests hidden spiritual meanings. In the vision the lady styles herself as the Immaculate Conception. This translates as someone who is in communion with God and does not suffer the effects of alienation caused by sin. Official

Catholic teaching and subsequent theology has spelled out the reasons for this teaching and its implications. But when the Immaculate Conception gives instructions to Bernadette, the center of attention shifts from the Lady to the one searching in the earth for water and plants. The significant symbolic features are: (1) the Immaculate Conception asks Bernadette to drink from the water and eat the plants that are underground, (2) Bernadette has to scratch four times in the earth to make the water appear, and (3) no one but Bernadette sees the water and plants. To the eyes of the bystanders, it is all mud.

Spiritual traditions think there is a spiritual center in the human person. This spiritual center is underground, an interior depth, lying deeper than the physical and mental dimensions. It is not easily found, and we must search in and through the muddier dimensions for the water to flow. We must persevere in the scratching, even going beyond the traditional symbolic number of three. It is on the fourth scratching that what blocks the Spirit/water will be moved away and the Spirit/water will release, flow outward, bubble up. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, "the water that I will give will become . . . a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). But this flow is not a sudden geyser; it is gradual and increases as people have the courage to participate in it. At first, only those privileged by revelation will attempt to drink. But soon others will drink and bathe, and the healing powers of the Spirit will become manifest.

I think there is in every person an underground longing. There is a story about it from the Hassidic tradition. With his disciples gathered around, a Rabbi begins his teaching about the reality of God. When he finishes, he asks, "Do you understand?"

"No," they answer.

Then he introduces them into the mystery of God's presence in the universe, ending this teaching with, "Do you understand?"

"No," they answer.

In desperation, the Rabbi spins tales of wonder from past times. When he finishes, he is exhausted from the exhilaration of Spirit. He hesitantly asks his question. The disciples hang their heads. The answer is no.

The Rabbi becomes quiet. He begins to sing, a haunting melody of yearning, pining, longing for God. The disciples' heads begin to rise. Their speech merges together, each voice attuned to the longing of the song.

The Rabbi did not have to ask. They understood.

We may not understand the higher reaches of spiritual thought, but we all sway to the Rabbi's song. Each of us shares the spiritual-social longing of Mary. However, it may be underground. On the surface, we are immersed in the world as it is; and we work overtime to simply survive and/or to survive in style. But the deeper yearning is there and it never goes away. It is not merely a childish desire for what is missing, a form of utopian delusion. We long for a better world that we already know in embryonic form. It does not come to us from beyond ourselves while we wait expectantly. It comes out of us, out of the earth we are part of—if only we would dig deep enough and drink from the water that freely flows.

Christmas: Midnight, Dawn, Day

Unfolding Revelation

In the Catholic tradition there are three gospel texts for the feast of Christmas. These selections (Luke 2:1-14; Luke 2:15-20; John 1:1-18) are scheduled for three different liturgies—midnight, dawn, and day. However, it is difficult to take these times literally and connect them to the liturgical life of contemporary Christians. Although Midnight Mass is a favorite of many and daytime Christmas liturgies are often crowded, few attempt a Mass at Dawn. Christian Sunrise Services are more popular at Easter. Also, the popularity of children’s liturgies in the early and late afternoon of Christmas Eve preempts any timetable that would begin at midnight. Therefore, these specified liturgical times are not a pastorally practical Mass schedule.

Living in Darkness and Light

In fact, midnight, dawn, and day are probably not advocating a liturgical all-nighter. They are best understood as symbolic references, honored metaphors that represent points on a continuum of revelation. The movement is from hidden (midnight) to partially seen (dawn) to fully revealed (day). These three chronological/cosmic images suggest a journey of consciousness, progress in both understanding what “his appearance among us” means and greater integration of that meaning into our lives. The liturgical framework of Christmas liturgies acknowledges the gradual advances our consciousness makes when it contemplates and integrates spiritual realities.

This developmental framework reflects the Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) from the Second Vatican Council. In that document there is a significant discussion of passing on the Tradition, a treasured part of which are the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke and the theologies and practices that have sprung up around the feast of Christmas. This handing on is not a matter of mindless memory, a slavish attachment to correct information. Rather, “there is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. . . . Thus, as centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are

fulfilled in her" (DV 8). In other words, we have not yet uncovered all we have received. Our present understanding of the revelation of God and humankind in Jesus Christ is truthful, but it is also provisional. We are on a continuum of revelation as the traditional midnight-dawn-day scenario acknowledges.

This perspective of deepening realization also relates quite well to the Gospel of Luke, which provides two of the three Christmas readings. The introduction to the gospel addresses Theophilus who has been given an account by eyewitnesses "who have handed down [the events that have been fulfilled among us]" (Luke 1:2). But Luke is concerned that Theophilus may not know the deeper meaning (*epignosis*) of what he has been told. It is not a matter of simply hearing about Jesus or assembling the correct facts. It is a matter of "realizing the certainty of the teachings you have received" (Luke 1:4). Luke's intention is to move Theophilus and all readers of his gospel from midnight to dawn to day, to facilitate the progress of comprehending and integrating the event of Jesus Christ.

How this deepening realization will occur is portrayed in Mary, the major adult figure in the infancy narrative of Luke and a key figure of the Advent-Christmas season. At the instigation of an angel, the shepherds seek out Joseph, Mary, and the infant in the manger. When they find them, they make known everything the angel has told them about the child—most prominently that he is savior, Christ, and Lord. All who hear it are amazed. However, Mary has a different response, moving beyond amazement. "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, NAB). Also, in the episode of the boy Jesus remaining in Jerusalem and his parents returning to find him teaching in the temple, all who heard Jesus were "amazed" (Luke 2:47). But, as he dutifully returned with his parents to Nazareth, Mary once again "kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51, NAB).

Amazement signals something has gone beyond conventional understanding and has elicited an "Oh wow!" Something has occurred that is definitely out of the ordinary. An angel visits shepherds with the announcement of the birth of the Savior, Christ, and Lord, and it proves to be true. This child, now twelve years old, has such profound religious knowledge that he teaches Teachers. But Mary foregoes amazement and begins reflecting. She is not only a mother but a thoughtful disciple. She models the pondering heart that will be the path of all who follow Jesus. On this path the deeper meanings of his life and person will be revealed. Pondering is the path from midnight through dawn to day.

Although the portrait of Mary may show the way, we are not Mary. We do not ponder directly the historical events of Jesus' birth. We ponder the written texts that mediate the meaning of those historical events. These texts are the inspired witness to the revelation of God and humankind that has happened in the life of Jesus Christ. It is in and through these texts (and the rituals that accompany them) that we encounter the revelation of God and humankind. Therefore, it is in the act of welcoming and hosting these texts that we journey through the world of midnight, dawn, and day.

This liturgical framework that moves from darkness to light gives the impression of steady progress, a logical and orderly unfolding of insights and integrations. This has never been my experience. All three states—not seeing, dimly seeing, and fully seeing—somehow exist together and overlap with one another. For example, the glimpses of dawn may advance into day, but they may also recede into midnight. Also, the illumination of day can take the mind to an outer circle where a new midnight begins. It is not the old midnight that is completely in the dark. It is paradoxically a midnight that the light of day has created. "Getting" the revelation has led to a concealment. The always transcendent God, whose love is beyond imagining, is to blame. We see and do not see. Our consciousness of spiritual realities is continually moving back and forth along a continuum of darkness and light. We are in the position of the poet who greets him the days he meets him and blesses when he understands.

The vacillation between not seeing, dimly seeing, and fully seeing is because of the nature of spiritual reality. The physical and social dimensions of human existence are more readily available to our consciousness and occupy our awareness most of the time. Think of how much attention we give our bodies daily—bathing, elimination, eating, clothing, etc. Think of how much attention we give our social reality daily—getting from place to place, talking, planning, working, relating, etc. We become expert in navigating our physical and social realities.

But the spiritual is more subtle. Lao Tzu characterized it as "lingering like gossamer, barely hinting at existence." Rumi called the manifestations of the spiritual mysteries "secrets we sometimes see and then not." By our very makeup we seem to concentrate predominantly on the physical and social realms. We catch the spiritual in glimpses and have to meditate to attend to it in any sustained way. Midnight, dawn, and day are primarily cosmic realities. But they serve as excellent images of the communion between human consciousness and spiritual reality.

A complementary reason for these swings in awareness is the nature of the Christmas texts we are invited to ponder. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' interlocutors plead with him, "Speak plainly." We might beg the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke for the same clarity. Both evangelists think the birth of Christ fulfills past promises and makes new promises that will be fulfilled later in the full life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The stories reprise the past and foreshadow the future. Therefore, they are filled with dense allusions to what has come before and subtle predictions of what will come later. Neither the allusions nor the predictions are straightforward. Most of the time, they are expressed in provocative images rather than clear references. Therefore, a literary and spiritual nose is necessary for the detective work. The literary structure of the texts seems to invite not seeing, dimly seeing, and fully seeing.

The prologue of the Gospel of John, which is the reading for the Christmas Day liturgy, provides a slightly different foundation for shifts in awareness. John 1:1-18 is like the overture to a symphony, providing one-line refrains that will be given full treatment later. These themes are not in the literary forms of Matthew and Luke's narratives. Although there are images in John's prologue, there is not an overt story line. Rather, there is succinct summary after succinct summary. Each is a headline, begging for an explanation that is not immediately given. They tease and provoke thought, showing and hiding their meaning simultaneously. We know the only way we can pursue these startling claims is to take on the full unfolding story of the gospel. When we discover Nicodemus who comes to Jesus at night (midnight) (John 3:1), and Mary Magdalene who goes to the tomb early on the first day of the week while it is still dark (dawn) (John 20:1), and the Samaritan woman who comes to draw water at noon (day) (John 4:7), we know we are in an adventure of consciousness.

Therefore, these three Masses—midnight, dawn, and day—constitute an in-your-face challenge. The gospel texts do not carry disinterested information, data about past events. They have two ambitions: to express the truth and meaning of "his appearance among us" and to communicate that truth and meaning to our pondering consciousness in such a way that we are transformed. If we are to honor these texts, there is no avoiding personal involvement. Texts like these are after our souls. They are the winds of God, and, as the Hindu tradition reminds us, they are always blowing and we must raise our sails. But also, as the Hindu tradition warns, if we do not risk an encounter with these sacred texts, we may read them as donkeys carry sandalwood, knowing the burden

but not the fragrance. No matter what Mass we attend at Christmas, the invitation is to move along the continuum of midnight, dawn, and day.

Wagering on Christmas

But there is an application of the midnight-dawn-day scenario that goes beyond the interpretation of texts. The Christmas season has a reputation for special experiences. It is a time when the nine-to-five, business-as-usual days are supposed to be supplemented by still and bright nights with angelic serenades. If angels can bring good news to shepherds watching flocks on the long-ago hills of Palestine, surely they can manage to gladden snow-trudging commuters on the streets of Chicago. We are hopeful for a more-than-ordinary influx of peace, love, and joy. Depending on our circumstances, this type of experience may be desperately needed. Our health may be precarious; our careers or vocations may be under stress; our finances may be dipping badly; our relationships may be in need of repair; and the larger world, by our humble estimate, may be going slightly insane. We want relief from worry and assurance of worth. And we want it to be visited upon us. We want it brought by the "Day-Star from on high."

However, this way of thinking puts all the weight on heavenly intervention. We will be grateful receivers of whatever gifts miraculously appear, but we do not see ourselves as active participants in bringing about the inner states that can bless our lives. We have our hands out, but our minds are minimally engaged. We think our only task is to passively wait for the arrival of a package, rip open the wrapping, and grab what lies inside. Shirts, sweaters, and coats may be available in this way, but inner states of peace, love, and joy do not arrive ribbon wrapped. When we think they do, we set ourselves up for disenchantment. Many Christmas curmudgeons are only people disappointed by their own expectations.

However, the midnight-dawn-day pattern suggests another sequence, a sequence in which arrival from beyond and attentiveness within play complementary roles. Most likely, an initially darkened state (midnight) will become aware of a glimmer of light. Dawn begins with only a streak. In other words, we see a sight or hear a word. On the surface it may be an ordinary sight or word. It may be the sight of a child with mouth open and tongue out, trying to catch falling snowflakes; it may be a word from Aunt Harriet about how much she misses Uncle Fred at this time of year; it may be a phrase from Dylan Thomas's *A Child's Christmas in Wales*; it may be the sight of a slightly bent Christmas tree. We cannot predict the

sights and words that will make an impact and open midnight to the possibility of dawn. But for some reason these sights and words attract us, call us to pause and ponder. On a level deeper than rationality, we intuit that what we have seen and heard holds the promise of hidden gifts.

We are at a crossroads. We can ignore this glimmer of dawn and continue on with the important tasks that claim our attention. If we do, midnight remains. But if we take the invitation and open the gift that has been given, we begin a process that leads to the positive inner states of Christmas. We host the sight or word in memory, play Mary and ponder it, connect it to other things we know and feel, and talk to friends about it. As we do this, the beginning of dawn unfolds into day. We pursue the attractive sight and word until we understand why we are attracted. In this process of understanding, we come to realization, a further stage of consciousness. In realization a truth comes home to us in a way that includes our identity and destiny. We grasp the essential, and the essential is more beautiful than we have imagined. G. K. Chesterton was on to it when he suggested that Christmas was like finding a room in the back of your heart that betrayed you into good. This finding, or something like it, may be the full sun of Christmas Day, but it will only be ours if we freely and persistently engage the revelatory process of midnight-dawn-day.

Once the midnight-dawn-day process of Christmas begins, it has a momentum that we must attend to and cooperate with. But the previous question is: How does it start? How do sights and words leap out at us and make a claim on our attention? Although there is no way of telling what sights and words will have our name on them, there is a way to prepare to see and hear them. If we create and cultivate antennae, they will eventually pick up signals. The way to do this is to engage in a spiritual practice that is designed to establish the necessary eyes and ears. What I suggest is to say this prayer for attention every morning, midday, and night.

Lord, I know I have eyes that see not and ears that hear not. Today, something I see may cause me to pause: something I hear may invite me to ponder. Keep my eyes and ears open so I may follow what calls to me into the grace of Christmas where midnight unfolds into dawn and dawn into day.

Amen. (Let it be!)

Persevere in the prayer and stay awake to the unpredictability of grace. This is the wager of Christmas.

Christmas: Midnight

Luke 2:1-14



Seeing Haloes

A Spiritual Commentary

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The background assumption of these narrated facts is that the emperor needs greater tax revenue. So the “divine Augustus” parodies the universal reach of God and decrees that the whole world should be registered. The picture sequence in the text begins with a wide-angle lens of Augustus in Rome, narrows to Quirinius in Syria, and finally pinpoints Joseph and Mary as they make their way from “Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem.” The sequence is both political and geographical—from an emperor in Rome, to a governor in Syria, to a man without a title from the town of Nazareth, a town so small the larger territory of Galilee has to be cited to inform the reader of the general location of this unmapped place.

However, once Joseph is introduced, Augustus and Quirinius fade. What is important about Joseph is that he is from the house and family of David, and, along with Mary, is making his way to his ancestral roots in Bethlehem of Judea. What is important about Mary is that she is pregnant and delivers a firstborn son whom she wraps in swaddling clothes and lays in a manger. This resting place was necessary, for there was no place for Mary, Joseph, and the child at the inn.

The tenor of this text is that it is a straightforward account of what happened. These are just the hard facts of living in Roman-occupied territory. Indeed, it is a familiar story of the abusive use of political power. The powerful are making decisions to strengthen themselves and, in the process, burdening the powerless. All later imaginative Christian reflections that stress the difficulty of travel for the pregnant Mary, the anxiety of not finding room at the inn, and the “animal conditions” for the birth of the baby are justified by these bare facts that sketch the plight of the poor at the hands of the powerful. It is Augustus’s desire for wealth that oppresses Joseph and Mary.

However, the storyteller has chosen his “facts” carefully. What looks one way to “eyes that do not see” looks another way to “eyes that see.” Christians who have been inducted into the Way intuit these narrated facts are as pregnant as Mary. In particular, the pretensions of Augustus to enroll the whole world are unmasked and shown to be part of a hidden divine plan that will eventually evangelize the whole world. The true purpose of the census is not to enrich the emperor. It is to provide cover for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, the city of David. Jesus will be born there, and so the prophecy that God swore to David will begin to be fulfilled.

“Moreover, I declare to you that I, the LORD, will build you a house; . . . I will raise up your offspring after you who will be one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. He it is who shall build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me, and I will not withdraw my favor from him as I withdrew it from him who preceded you; but I will maintain him in my house and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be firmly established forever.”
(1 Chronicles 17:10-14, NAB)

Augustus may be the ruler of the earth, but he is a pawn in the larger plot of heaven. In the language of a later spirituality, Augustus proposes but God disposes.

Also, all the seeming facts of Jesus’ birth—a firstborn, a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, laid in a manger, and excluded from the inn—are symbols brimming with significance. “Child wrapped in swaddling clothes” and “laid in a manger” will be repeated by the angel who visits the shepherds and who will emphasize that they are a “sign.” In other words, they symbolize truths about Jesus that are central to his identity and mission. These symbols will carry the true interpretation of the titles Messiah and Lord.

However, “firstborn” and “no room in the inn” also convey core features of Jesus’ life. “Firstborn” is more than a statement of child placement. It alludes to a future time when others will receive the revelation of Jesus and live as he did. The term suggests the first of a line. A second-born, third-born, fourth-born, etc., are expected. The life of Jesus will generate a new family of followers (Mark 3:31-35). “No room in the inn” also foreshadows a future event. In Jerusalem, acknowledged as the city of David, Jesus will be rejected by the chief priests and the people. His earthly life will end as it began. At his death he will be a “stranger in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:18), as at his birth he is a stranger in Bethlehem. In the twin cities of David, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, there will be no room for David’s son, the inheritor of the everlasting promise. The symbols of Jesus’ birth tell the truth of his life—some will receive his revelation and follow him (“firstborn”) while others will reject his revelation and kill him (“no room in the inn”).

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people . . .

The scene shifts from Joseph, Mary, and the child to shepherds and an angel. The prerogative of the storyteller is at work, weaving connections between what happened in Bethlehem and the people who will understand its true meaning. These people are shepherds who do not sleep at night. They live with their sheep and are vigilant watchers of the flock. They symbolize Christian leaders who were the first to hear the word of Jesus, grasp its meaning, and now live in service and loving care of all who came to believe through them.

These shepherds will receive a firsthand revelation, from the angel’s “mouth” to their ears. The spiritual truth that underlies and is cryptically revealed by that series of narrated facts about Augustus, Quirinius, and Joseph and Mary will be made known to them. After they find out for themselves the truth of what the angel has proclaimed, they will freely share “what had been made known to them.” Although the shepherds are the first to receive the revelation, they do not guard their knowledge for the sake of privilege or position. They become examples of what will become a chronic concern of Christianity—how those who are fortunate enough to have the faith pass it on to others. These are good shepherds.

Angels are messengers from God who appear to people on earth. As literary figures, they serve the theological function of allowing God to be in heaven and on earth at the same time. The appearance of an angel is something less than divine presence, so the “total otherness” of God is safeguarded and honored. The mystery of God remains mystery. Whatever the angel reveals of God, it can be assumed that even more is concealed.

Yet, at the same time, angels truly carry the glory of the Lord. It envelops those to whom they appear, so God is present to people. Angels are never independent contractors; they are always mediations of the divine. Therefore, the character of an angel holds in tension divine transcendence (God is always more) and divine immanence (God is present). This combination of mystery and revelation is the tension of true faith.

The quip about biblical angels is: whenever they appear, they command the trembling people, “Do not be afraid!” This gives some idea of what they looked like. However, it is not their frightening appearance that shakes human composure. The shepherds are afraid because they have encountered something formally greater than they are. We instinctively fear the greater because we cannot control it and suspect it has arrived to do us harm. That is why the angel immediately assures the shepherds that she or he is not about doom and destruction but about good news and joy, not for a select few but for *all* the people. This is geared to forestall their knee-jerk reaction. Also in the context of the full story, it juxtaposes God, the real ruler of the earth, with Caesar. Caesar Augustus was crushing the whole world for his own glory. But the glory of God that shines around the shepherds wants nothing for itself. Its arrival is to swell all people with joy.

“. . . to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

**“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”**

The fact that the Messiah and Lord is born “this day” is an essential component of the “good news of great joy.” When a people live in ex-

pectation for a long period of time, their minds and hearts inevitably focus on the future. The present is always empty of what will eventually come. Therefore, there can never be deep satisfaction for there is always something missing. An unfulfilled promise robs today, no matter what is happening, of meaning and joy. The angel's announcement ends this living for tomorrow. The time of waiting is over; fulfillment has arrived. The time of emptiness has been transformed into the fullness of time. When the aged Simeon holds the child Jesus in the temple, he says,

"Now, Master, you may let your servant go
in peace, according to your word,
for my eyes have seen your salvation . . ." (Luke 2:29-30, NAB)

Simeon has experienced the hope that drove his days. He waits for nothing more, so time for him is irrelevant. Time has reached a fullness, a completeness. The longing for tomorrow is over. Joy in today has replaced it.

The titles of Messiah and Lord are traditional expressions of salvation. At the time of Jesus, they had definite meanings and associations. People in the gospels, especially the religious leaders, knew those meanings and associations and took them seriously. When they listened to Jesus, many did not think his words and deeds matched what they knew to be the case about the Messiah and Lord. This triggered a very radical question that permeates the life of Jesus and is implicit in this birth announcement. Are the conventional meanings of Messiah and Lord correct and, therefore, make Jesus profoundly mistaken, a foolish pretender to these sacred roles? Or is the life of Jesus, his words and deeds, the real touchstone that reconfigures the limited and, in some cases, the false understandings of these titles? The answer of the Gospel is clear: Jesus is the truth of the titles that must be re-understood in the light of his life, death, and resurrection. The angel's message is the beginning of this radical reappraisal.

In particular, the shepherds are to be guided in their understanding of Messiah and Lord by a sign. The sign carries the correct understanding of the titles. "An infant wrapped in swaddling clothes" is a beloved child. The unloved child was not wrapped in cloths (Ezek 16:4-5). But the loved child was washed, rubbed with salt, and clothed. This truth of belovedness is the same truth that is revealed at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:22) when the heavenly voice calls him the beloved Son and at the transfiguration (Luke 9:35) when the same voice calls him the chosen

one. The child in swaddling clothes reveals an intimate and loving relationship with God. This is what it means to be the Lord.

“Lying in a manger” complements the swaddling clothes and points to the mission of the beloved son. The manger is a feeding trough. It looks ahead to Jesus’ table fellowship and his paradigmatic gesture of breaking bread and giving it to others as a symbol of putting his own Spirit into them. The beloved Son will be food for his disciples and, in the universal vision of Luke, for all people. This is what it means to be the Messiah.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

**“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”**

In Luke’s gospel, angels rejoice when good things happen on earth. (“I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents” [Luke 15:10, NAB].) Therefore, there is no finer way to finish this birth announcement than by bringing on stage a multitude of mediators to sing this “good news” summary. Heaven and earth have come together; the human race is connected to the Divine Source. This communion with God has been God initiated because God is love, and this love naturally flows outward into people. When people receive this favor, the result is peace. Peace is the restoration of relationships. All who are separated and alienated return into one community. This song is the angelic way of honoring the double commandment of love—to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and might, and your neighbor as yourself. This great ambition is no longer an ideal. Its historical embodiment has been born—Jesus Christ, one in being both with God and the human.

Teaching

In W. H. Auden’s *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, Simeon meditates: “And because of His visitation, we may no longer desire God as if He were lacking; our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to Him who is always and everywhere present. Therefore, at every moment we pray that, following Him, we may depart from our anxiety into His peace” (*For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio in Religious Drama*. New York: Living Age Books, 1957, 56). In

pondering the birth of Christ, Christian reflection has often come to Simeon's conclusion—the birth of Christ, "His visitation," changes the agenda of humans from pursuing a missing God to surrendering to an "always and everywhere present" God.

This is a landmark shift, and it changes the burden of responsibility. When God was missing, we could always take umbrage and ask questions that were incapable of being answered. I always liked the ticked-off rhetorical question, "Where is God in all this, anyway?" with its implied answer of nowhere. The often hysterical, "How long, O Lord, how long?" has real dramatic power. The tone is close to Woody Allen's accusation that God is an underachiever. When God was missing, God could always be blamed. When we are missing, the divine cannot be a scapegoat. Our flickering mind is the problem.

There is a Christmas condition that is universally recognized to cause our lack of attention. I have my own small story about it. It happened long ago in the parking lot of the Jewel grocery store three days before Christmas. A woman was hoisting bags of groceries out of a cart and into the trunk of her car. She was muttering over and over to herself, "I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it."

As I passed her, I piped up jokingly, "You are going to make it. You are going to make it."

Her head came out of the trunk. She stared at me with a "What do you know, fella?" look, and said in a voice as adamant as a stamped foot, "I'm not going to make it."

Chastened, I trudged into the store. The "Under Ten" checkout line had twenty people in it. I wondered if I was going to make it.

The "it" in question can be many things. "It" can be getting everything done, surviving the season, avoiding a breakdown, not yelling at fellow motorists, salespeople, your children, etc. On a deeper level, it can mean we will not be aware of the "always and everywhere present" God, and we will not be able to surrender our anxieties and enter God's peace. The holiday is deeply schizophrenic. The very revelation of divine presence the feast celebrates, the season undercuts. The pace of December has us by the throat, and we feel fragmented, irritated, and depressed or an inch away from it.

Spiritual directors hear this complaint every year. In fact, it was a spiritual director who told me the real definition of Christmas was that it was that time of year when we try to love all our family at the same time—and fail. The offset advice to this out-of-control rush is predictable. Make time for prayer, spiritual reading, attendance at liturgies, and reflection. A little

discipline is the answer. After all, it is we who are missing. How can such a traditional and commonsense suggestion be denied?

But I fantasize that our efforts at attention are matched by God's efforts at attraction. The more hassled and distracted we are, the more God pulls out all the stops. It is like what Shug tells Celie in *The Color Purple*. God gets "pissed off" when we do not notice the color purple of the field. But God has no notion of punishing us for our lack of noticing. Instead, God makes something even more attractive to get our attention. I don't mean to take us off the hook for faithfully engaging in spiritual practices that sharpen awareness. (See this volume, "Christmas: Midnight, Dawn, Day.") But I do not think we should underestimate God's persistence and inventiveness.

What does it mean to see the Christmas presence of God?

A number of years ago, I received a letter from a man who was in Rome for the feast of Epiphany. He was in the Piazza Navona. "The piazza was so crowded that movement through it was possible only by stepping into 'rivers of people.' People were so tightly pressed together that, for the most part, they could not move. There were four or five streams of people, each stream moving in one direction or another. Moving from one end of the piazza to the other could only be accomplished by stepping into the stream and being carried along. You had to force your way out of the stream when you reached your destination."

As he and his companions were navigating one of these streams of people, they were suddenly pushed aside. A clearing had appeared in the midst of the people. Standing in the middle were two very surprised children. When the children looked up to see why they were not being jostled by the crowd, they came face-to-face with Befana. (Befana is the good witch of Christmas who distributes gifts. She functions something like Santa Claus.) Befana leaned over to them, whispered something, reached into her sack, pulled out some presents, and gave them to the children. Then she disappeared; more precisely, the crowd collapsed back into the open circle, engulfing her and the children.

The letter writer explains that this sudden clearing that appeared and disappeared was created by the calculated movements of teenage boys. But the mechanics of what happened is not what interested him. What it brought home was the meaning of the feast of Epiphany. In the rush of the river of life suddenly a clearing opens and an unexpected gift is given. I cannot say that there are times like this in every life, but I hope there are. They are meant to be treasured and pondered until they bring about long-lasting effects.

At Christmas I think about these graced moments in terms of haloes, rings of light around the heads and/or bodies of people, animals, trees, etc. Haloes reveal a divine presence that manifests itself by enhancing and perfecting each particular created being, by lighting up its reality and making it stand out. It is this perceived communion, this favor and pleasure of God to all creation, that is capable of moving us from anxiety to peace. When it happens and we see haloes, we know, even before they fade, we have done nothing to deserve them, even if we have been faithful to our spiritual practices. The patient God simply waits for our racing minds and blinking eyes to stop long enough to see the world whole.

Even at Christmas,
when haloes
are pre-tested by focus groups
for inclusion in mass market campaigns,
they are hard to see.

Annie Dillard was scrutinizing
the forest floor at Pilgrim's Creek
when she looked up
and saw a tree haloed in light.

She had caught the tree at prayer,
in a moment so receptive and full
the boundaries of bark burst
and its inner fire
became available for awe.

But seeing haloes
is more than a lucky sighting.
It entails the advent skill
of sustaining attention,
the simple act,
as Dillard found out,
of looking up.

That is how haloes are seen,
by looking up into largeness,
by tucking smallness
into the folds of infinity.

I do not know this
by contemplating
shimmering trees.

24 *Following Love into Mystery*

Rather there was woman,
busy at Christmas table,
and I looked up
to catch a rim of radiance
etching her face,
to notice curves of light
sliding along her shape.
She out-glowed the candles.
All the noise of the room left my ears
and silence sharpened my sight.

When this happens,
I do not get overly excited.
I merely allow love to be renewed,
for that is the mission of haloes,
the reason they are given to us.

Nor do I try to freeze the frame.
Haloes suffer time,
even as they show us
what is beyond time.

But when haloes fade,
they do not abruptly vanish,
abandoning us
to the sorrow of lesser light.

They recede,
as Gabriel departed Mary,
leaving us pregnant.