

Homily, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2018, Jane A. Beebe

“Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love's pure light;
Radiant beams from thy holy face
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.”

The Gospel reading from John seems to be all about light. John's words can seem a bit abstract: beautiful and mystical to be sure—but what does this mean for us? First, we hear that there was *never* a time when the Word, the light of Jesus' presence, was separate from God. This is affirmed in the beginning of the Nicene Creed we hear that Christ is “...God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made...” Second, this Light is for us: it brings us life; it shines into all the dark places. There is no place this light cannot illuminate. This light enlightens us in every sense of the word. Quite literally we cannot live without sufficient light. Third, it is quite amazing that “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” The Word is not merely alive, but aliveness itself. On Christmas Day we are invited to receive this light—as we do in our baptism—and behold God's glory. Tonight, at last, we have lit all the candles in the Advent wreath. Allow that Light to draw you, envelop you, warm you—enlighten you.

How wonderful that we have a day when all we are called to do is to behold. The definition of the verb “behold” is: “[To] see or observe (someone or something, especially of remarkable or impressive nature). The reality of God—the very face of God—can be observed all around us, and now, also within the human being. The origin of this word is quite wonderful. The Old English word is *bihalden*. The literal meaning has the sense of *holding*, not in a casual way but completely and with intention. When we behold someone, something of that person’s inner light draws us nearer. We are warmed and enfolded in their presence.

In the 16th century there was an extraordinary poet and mystic named Azikri. In his devotional practice, Azikri hoped that the four-letter acrostic for the Name of God, YHWH, would “rise off the page and form a single flame of fire.” (Cole, *Poetry of Kabbalah*, p. 362) This experience of praying with Scripture is meant to be an act of rejoicing that “gladdens the soul.” “...The soul lights up and shines wondrously.” It emits sparks! (Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, p. 154) Azikri also had the notion that God wrote the four letters of God’s name on the human face. “Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace...” In beholding those “radiant beams” we can reflect that light into the world: God’s light, Jesus’ light.

One of my dearest memories of “beholding” happened about thirty years ago. Two friends of mine in Iowa, Helen and Bob, went through the adoption process for their son Ted who is also one of my godchildren. The adoption process was preceded by heartbreaking, arduous and humiliating tests to determine fertility. The process of adoption itself entailed applications, interviews, and a lot of waiting. Ted was born in Korea on October 12. As a baby he became sick with a stomach infection and could not travel. Helen had a photograph of him and prayed for him daily. A few months went by.

In the middle of winter, I drove from Grinnell up to Mason City (nearly to Minnesota) to deliver my baby gift. I wanted them to have an infant car seat (bought at Toys R Us with the advice of my library colleagues) in time for them to pick up Teddy at the airport. He would be on his way as soon as he was well enough to travel. I We were equally hopeful and worried: so small and vulnerable a being to travel so far. I have never experienced a night so dark and so cold: 40 degrees below zero at least. The terrain between Grinnell and Mason City is bleak that time of year. The air is so cold it looks blue. I think of Christina Rossetti’s beautiful poem *In the Bleak Midwinter* that we sing as a Christmas hymn:

“In the bleak mid-winter
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 mid-winter
Long ago.”

How interesting that our longing to behold often leads to journeys. Mary and Joseph have journey to Bethlehem. In those familiar words from Luke chapter 2 we hear that newly engaged Joseph and Mary travel from Nazareth in order to be registered. Joseph is “descended from the house and family of David.” Bethlehem is known as the “city of David” so it is Joseph’s registration site. When the shepherds are visited by the angels and learn of the Messiah’s birth, they too travel to the city of David to behold the Christ child. What has drawn you to journey to Christ Memorial this evening? Even if you live nearby, perhaps you have been on a journey nonetheless, not necessarily measured in miles, but in a deepening longing to behold... As Paul says in 2 Corinthians: “For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Bob and Helen invited me to meet them at the airport the night he was to arrive—I think it was late February or early March. The flight was coming in to Des Moines from the Northwest via California. It was very late at night and the flight was delayed. We and the other waiting families were the only ones left at the airport, huddled in the waiting area. Some of the families had brought their other

children with them. From time to time we would get an update about how soon the plane would land. The worry, excitement and anticipation kept us all awake.

Finally, the plane landed. Each family had a special blanket for their child.

Volunteers would take the blankets on board the plane and bring the children out.

The families could easily identify their own blankets, making it easier to get the babies into their parents' arms as soon as possible.

The gangway of the airplane was transformed into a special birth canal as the children were brought out, one by one. I have a picture of Teddy taken that night. Helen was holding him in her arms, wrapped in his blanket with his face just peeking over her shoulder. Bob and Helen took Teddy to a motel nearby, too exhausted to drive home that night. They told me later that they stayed up until morning just looking at him. By the way, Ted is short for Theodore: God's gift.