

Of Angels, Songs in the Night and Deep Human Intuition

New Year's Eve

Luke 2:9, 30; Galatians 4:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Well, we've done it again - angels, songs in the night, a Jewish maiden visited by Gabriel, the annunciation of a child to be born, conceived by the Spirit, a woman overshadowed, giving forth a son who was to be called Holy, the Son of God. We have sung the songs again, the beautiful carols. We have experienced the lump in the throat and the catch in our voice, and we have looked at one another and loved one another and had that deep down intuition that after all is said and done, it is true that the final and ultimate reality is love and at the core, at the center of things, is a God who is the source and fountain of love, the ground and goal and guide of all that is. We have seen that all in the flesh of a child. We understand that intuitively. Somehow or other, we grasp it. As we celebrate this holy birth once again, we know the story is true. We know the fairy tale is true.

We all love stories, don't we? I told you before that I have such a vivid memory of loving the fairy tales of my childhood. I remember when I must have been four or five years old, I contracted Scarlet Fever and, in the dark ages when I was a child, the house was put under quarantine. There was a sign on the door, warning anyone who would approach. My father and my three sisters had to move out into the garage. What could my mother do? She couldn't leave me a motherless child and so she had to put up with me over a week or ten days. She read me stories, The Gingerbread Man, Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, all those stories, and she would get so weary, I know now. She would try, on occasion, to skip a page or two by turning two at a time and I would catch her, of course, because I knew the stories by heart. They were always the same, but they were always wonderful, and they always gave that same impact.

Fairy tales are true, you know. They are true deep down about the nature of life. Take a fairy tale and look at some of the favorite childhood tales - they are not all sweetness and light at all. They have violence in them, they have darkness in them, they have dragons, princesses locked up in castle towers and all of that kind of thing.

If you go to Marshall Field's in Chicago right now, you can see the magnificent windows downtown that they always decorate at this season of the year, and who makes the cut this year? Harry Potter. We hear so much discussion about what a wonderful phenomenon this is, that our children are reading again and it is not too unusual to see children going down the hallway in school reading a book. Someone should tell them that the Greek philosopher Demosthenes fell into a pit doing this, but the point is that these stories are wonderful and we all get caught up in stories. But, the stories, you see, are posited on the premise that there is some meaning and purpose, that things mean something, that things fit together, that things go somewhere, and so we love stories because we find ourselves in the stories.

"Once upon a time ..." All I have to do is say those words and don't you feel all sorts of warm associations with "Once upon a time?" Or, "It came to pass," and, of course, the wonderful, final line, "They lived happily ever after." Well, you see, that may sound naive, but I am not being silly this morning. The fairy tale and the fact that we love it, the fact that it starts out in some time whenever, and the fact that it ends with people living happily ever after is posited on a whole world and life view. It is a whole sense of reality and that is that things make sense and that finally, ultimately, things will work out and that finally there is a positive purpose at work in the total mix of things. Fairy tales are loved, I believe, because they convey that to us and we love them because, I'm going to suggest, that that touches something deep within us, some deep human intuition, and the Christmas story is certainly an example.

The Christmas story is not a fairy tale like the Gingerbread Boy. We're talking about a real, concrete, human birth and a real, concrete moment of history and a particular place among a particular people, but all the accoutrements with which the story is clothed are those marvelous accoutrements of the imagination, the poetic sense, this trying to bring to expression the deepest, deepest truth that came to expression in that child, in that life, in that ministry, and all of those wonderful garments in which the story is cast, of angels and songs in the night, of kneeling shepherds and adoring kings, all of those are retrojected back to that holy birth of that One who in his humanity caused people to kneel and to say, "My God!" *There*, they said, is the clue to the meaning of the universe. *There* is a window on the core of reality. *There* is an insight into the best of human life. And so, they told the story with angels and shepherds and kings, a night sky illumined by a star, and glorious, angelic anthems, and they told it all dressed marvelously in those garments in order to give expression to what was their deepest conviction and that was that what came to expression in the flesh of this one was a projection of that which was at the heart of things, that this one was the embodiment of God, that this one, in flesh, embodied that which was true deep down about the nature of reality.

I got a call from my daughter about a television program this past week. It ended up, actually, to be an infomercial, but the reason the call came was that there

were a couple of familiar faces that showed up there - Amy Jill Levine, who has been here, you remember Amy Jill, the Jewish scholar, and Dom Crossan, and come to find out, this was a program sold to the network by the Coral Ridge Ministries. When I saw Amy Jill Levine and I saw Dom Crossan and then I saw D. James Kennedy, I knew that either the millennium had come, or there was something operative here, and as a matter of fact, this was a Coral Ridge Ministries effort to tell the story of Christmas, but there was that which I could identify with so completely from my past. There was this anxious effort to prove that it was all true. The scholars selected were some mainline scholars, such as Dom Crossan and Amy Jill Levine and Helmut Koster and others, and it was so interesting to watch how the whole thing was stacked, how their sentences were selected out and used to make a certain point, and then the truth was told. I thought to myself, I could see myself and my past when I so much worried that it really happened in Bethlehem. Or that annual trotting out of the astronomy stories about constellations and whether or not the taxation under Quirinius was really at that particular time, and all of those little details that were so important in order to make it true. I remember those days. It has been a painful journey, to be able to get beyond all of that and to celebrate it as a wonderful story which at its heart has the deepest trust, the deepest intuition, that at the center of reality is the pulsating abyss of love.

Ah, you say, Christmas once a year, a naive little story. But, one has to remember that that intuition that spied in this child, grown into adulthood in the person of Jesus Christ, the intuition that saw in him what the story says, was an intuition that arose in the darkest of times. It was brutal, Herod's reign. It was the time of Caesar Augustus. It was a time of tramping Roman legions. It was not a good time. It was not all sweetness and light. For the people to whom he came, he was to be a savior and a deliverer from a life that was tough and rough and pervaded by darkness.

So, we have just celebrated the story again with all of its wonder and all of its joy. We could say, well, we can put it away. It's nice story, it's naive, however, because just this past week six or seven murders in Connecticut in one shot, and six or seven in Philadelphia a day or two ago, and one of the anti-Palestinian, orthodox rabbis shot last night in Jerusalem, and the peace process going nowhere, and the Palestinians being encouraged to step up the fight in order to find somehow or other some freedom, some independence in that seemingly implacable impasse of ancient feud and violence.

You may say, "Ah, nice story." I say, Yes, yes, yes. I believe it. I believe it in the face of all the evidence to the contrary and all the evidence to the contrary only convinces me more deeply that the story is true, and I don't know when and I don't know how, but I do know that love is stronger than hate, and light prevails over darkness and I do believe the story is true. Angels, songs in the night, all of the garments of this wonderful, wonderful story, and it meets the deepest human intuition and by God, it is true.