
“The Heavens are Telling”

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Christmas Day – Year C**

It happens every year on this day. Once again, for those of us who show up for it, we observe the miracle of the Incarnation. Every Christmas we get this opportunity; the opportunity to inhabit—to occupy!—a human singularity. It’s the singular experience of the Incarnation. We have come into this place, once again at this Christmas moment, to find a way to get inside that truth claim. It’s the claim that the majesty and glory and awesomeness of the entire universe has been encapsulated for us in the form of a unique human being.

That’s what we’re celebrating here today, isn’t it? We’re celebrating a human being who was born, lived and died, and that he died living a life of divine love and divine self-giving, and that his life and death encapsulates the meaning of the entire universe as a place of divine love and divine self-giving.

How awesome is that? And how challenging it can be to make that claim. Just stating that claim in words that can be understood is a challenge. Much more difficult, as we all know, is the effort to stake our lives on its truth and reality. Really? The entire universe as a place of divine love and divine self-giving? How dare we make such a claim knowing what we know about the world today?

Knowing what we know about the science of the actual universe, with galaxies too many to count, and with stars that far outshine our own sun; knowing what we know about the actual history of human beings on this earth, with evils too many to count, and with all the ways we have mistreated other human beings; how can we inhabit or occupy the universe as our place of divine love and divine self-giving?

Nonetheless that is the deep meaning of Christmas for us. And we dare say it on this day of all days. On this day especially we allow ourselves to imagine a universe in which there is ‘peace on earth and good will toward all people’ (Luke 2:14; paraphrase). What would it mean to get up every morning and live and work, and then lay ourselves back down, having believed in and worked toward the universe as a haven—a heaven!—for achieving ‘peace on earth and good will toward all people.’

It’s almost too much to describe, to put into words, isn’t it? But that is our opportunity on this day of all days. Perhaps the best we can do is say it over again in whatever words we can find. My privilege today is to share with you some of the words I have found, that amplify the words of scripture and the prayers and hymns that Holy Church provides on this occasion. And how blessed we are to have such words available to us today of all days, when our gospel of John begins so majestically with that echo of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word” (John 1:1).

Now, alongside invoking such traditional and exalted words, we also have available ordinary human experience as a kind of incarnated word. And one way to preach the Good News of God in Christ is to portray incarnate reality in words that engage our human interest in everyday stories. So I offer you the following story as a kind of everyday parable of incarnate experience. See what you think. But try to anticipate how we might think of the ordinary things in extraordinary terms. Here’s what I mean.

In ordinary terms the following story is a story of motherhood. But isn’t that what the Incarnation is also about? In making the effort to state divine reality in human words, wouldn’t one way be to say that the Incarnation is a type of divine mothering? Even our scriptures evoke a theme of divine mothering. Beginning with the book of Genesis, and including today’s readings from Hebrews and the gospel of John, we get a remarkable portrait of God hovering over creation like a mother bird brooding over its children and—on this particular day—hovering

over one special child.

But let's realize, Christian friends and friends of Christ, please realize the truth that many preachers like me call us to embrace every Christmas. The incarnation is not only about the miraculous birth of the Christ Child. It's also about God miraculously birthing every child who comes into the world—every one of *us* that is! Indeed, that's one of the deep themes of Christmas: that the incarnation of God in the Christ Child forever elevates the dignity and birth of all human beings—first as children but then throughout our adult lives too. Forever after that one birth, all human births are reconfigured as partaking in that divine reality and meaning. So on this special day we lay claim to every particle of the universe, but particularly human birth and childhood. We claim it all as being transfigured and ennobled by one unique birth.

So here's a thoroughly modern story about a stay-at-home mother with three young children. Her name is Melanie Darnell, and we know this story because she shared it on her blog; her internet site with more than 100,000 followers. She is also a vegan and a fitness guru who regularly exercises and focuses on staying healthy. So she couldn't understand why she was going through bouts of fatigue. That's why she eventually installed a night vision camera in her bedroom. She was afraid that she might be sleepwalking, for example. She desperately wanted to find something that would explain why she was not getting enough sleep. That's when she discovered what was causing her exhaustion.

The camera revealed, after she had put all the children to bed by 9 or 10pm, at 2:00am appeared the image of a small figure of one of her children pushing open her door and crawling up on her bed. As Melanie also saw her own image sleeping in complete ignorance, the figures of the two other children appeared through the door, reached the bed and peered over her. One got so close to her face that she was amazed, wondering how she could possibly have slept through this.

So what happened was that the footage showed Melanie heavily asleep as her bed slowly but surely started to turn into a children's party, but with herself too tired to wake up.

But for Melanie the more remarkable thing was what she did while asleep. Although she couldn't remember anything, she saw herself on camera displaying actions of consciousness. For example she would cuddle her toddler and move her hair away whenever he tried to pull on it. Whether she was half awake, or half sleeping, it explained everything about her interrupted normal sleep experience and the cause of her exhaustion.

Yet listen to what she commented on in her blog post to her followers. She wrote:

Moms often get criticized heavily, yet no one knows what they're dealing with in their daily life. Parenting doesn't end when the sun goes down.

Then she spotlighted the following aspects of motherhood that hardly ever get talked about.

During these moments let's all think of the other parents that are up with their babies at the very same middle of the night moments. [And let's] take comfort in the thought of each of us cradling our babies in the dark of our homes together in a shared experience. <https://youtu.be/iUkQILJe3dA>

We're together in a shared experience, Melanie Darnell claims. But what is that shared experience? And what does that story have to do with the magic of Christmas for children, or the miracle of the Incarnation? In probing the spiritual depths of Melanie Darnell's shared experience, can we affirm a dimension that we all share as creatures inhabiting a divine creation? Can't we say that the yearning of those three children for their mother's space and presence in the 'wee hours' of the night is like our yearning to inhabit a universe that bears God's meaning and presence everywhere we go? And can't we say something similar about Melanie Darnell's unconscious or semi-conscious response to those yearning children? Doesn't her response as a loving mother—a mother who was not sleepwalking but was 'sleep nurturing'—doesn't that response of giving her children reassurance and security even while unaware, doesn't that response also incarnate God's meaning and purpose for us throughout our lives? Isn't that mother's instinctive devotion to her children a living icon of the universe itself: a universe where the truth of existence, though sometimes hidden in a dark night, nonetheless bears the meaning of divine love and divine self-giving?

So here we have a parable of both parent-child and divine-human yearning and response. With its portrayal of a heavenly childhood it also conveys some of the magic of Christmas for children. Christmas magic offers children a special time to experience a heavenly childhood: a time when adults try to approximate or simulate for them a taste of heaven. That's how Christian families or communities also try to link Christmas magic with

our theology of Incarnation. We do this on Christmas Eve with children's pageants, and on Christmas Day itself with the opening and giving of gifts. In those ways we try to dramatize and simulate a heavenly universe; dramatized sometimes with angels and kings, or with shepherds and animals, but also with ordinary people like us joining in a festival of all creation.

In that connection C.S. Lewis, Psalm 19 "the greatest poem in The Psalms and one of the greatest lyrics in the world" (*Reflections on the Psalms*). "The heavens are telling," the Psalmist proclaims:

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And their expanse is declaring the work of [God's] hands.

Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night reveals knowledge.

—Psalm 19:1-2; NASB 1977

"Night to night reveals knowledge," the Psalmist declares; and what we know by faith is true even in the midnight hours. So the story we just shared affirms not just the magic of children's pageants and Santa Clause fantasies. The story also serves as a parable of that heavenly light that endures even in the dark nights of our lives and in the dark nights of the world. This is the light that our gospel says 'shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:5).

For the true light, which enlightens everyone, has come into the world . . .
and all who receive that light, who believe in its reality, receive power to become children of God,
who are born, not of blood or of the human will but of the will of God.
For the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a parent's uniquely beloved child, full of grace and truth (paraphrase of John 1:9, 12-14).

In the name of God:

"Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend"***

Amen.

* Sermon title: from Psalm 19:1. See also Franz Joseph Haydn, *The Creation* (1797–98), Movement no. 13 of Part 1, Die Himmel erzählen die Ehre Gottes or "The Heavens Are Telling."

** Robert Grant, d. 1838; No. 388 v. 5, *The Hymnal 1982*