

HE CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
Christmas 2022

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all people." (Luke 2:13-14)

I have been a priest for 32 years now, and in all that time, across three churches, I have encountered more wonderful, faithful, loving, generous, funny parishioners than I can possibly remember. But one, whom I'll never forget, was named Marie. Marie was a widow in her 90s who lived for nearly seventy years in the same house she had built with her husband when they were newly married. She was a fixture in the community and church, all for the good. When Stacie and I were new parents, Marie would call and announce that she had made a meatloaf. If we didn't want to cook that night it was ours for the taking. The boys loved it, and so did we. I can still taste all the bacon she layered on top of it.

One Advent, the weekly Bible study, of which Marie was a participant, wanted to take a close look at the Christmas narratives in the Gospels. It was a great idea, so we plunged right into it. Over the next weeks I would disclose secret knowledge not meant for mortal ears: that the Gospel of Mark has nothing at all to say about the birth of Jesus, that Matthew knew nothing about shepherds and a manger, that Luke never heard of the wise men or a star. While you may be struggling to take in the full enormity of these revelations, Marie was unphased. As Christmas drew near, she offered a devotional summary of our study. She said, *"Sometimes I allow my mind to drift to those fields outside of Bethlehem, and I imagine myself to be a shepherd on the first Christmas Eve. How glorious it must have been to look up and see the star shining down on the manger."*

You must understand that at the time I was young, eager, and possessed a head full of Bible trivia – a dangerous combination. I replied, "Actually, Marie, it wouldn't have happened that way if you were a shepherd. It was the wise men who saw the star. The shepherds looked up and saw the multitude of the heavenly host. Wise men: star. Shepherds: choir of angels." Without missing a beat Marie responded, *"A choir of angels? Oh, I would have enjoyed seeing them, too."*

At Christmas time, with Marie we go in heart and mind to Bethlehem to see this thing that has come pass, and the babe lying in a manger. But if we were able to travel back in time, what really would we see? Matthew and Luke agree that Bethlehem would be the correct location. You'd see the infant Jesus. You'd see Mary and Joseph, and if you were rude enough to ask, they would concur that the baby came to the world not in the usual way. From there the stories go in different directions, as I explained to Marie all those years ago. Of course, Marie looked at me as if I had completely missed the point, which I had. The point is, whether you read Matthew or Luke, heavenly signs accompany the birth. Light shines in the darkness. People look up in wonder and worship.

The stories mean to convey not precise historical fact, but profound theological truth about Jesus. Looking back on his entire life, the Gospel writers assert that for us and for our salvation, *he came down from heaven*. Everything about Jesus was a great gust of God's initiative. His birth, life, death, and resurrection are the improbable climax of the saving work God was doing through Israel. The Scriptures go on to explain that right there in Bethlehem, God became one of us. God

became human. It's called the miracle of the Incarnation. St. Paul would explain that in Jesus, *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19)*. He came down from heaven.

Here's the thing: today we are among friends. We sing the carols with energy and emotion. We recite the Creed with conviction. But as soon as you leave the warmth of this beautiful church, you may not get far before the bold and brash claims we make about Jesus meet with a reception as chilly as the winter air outside this weekend. Assuming the skeptics give you a hearing at all, if you say to them, "He came down from heaven," they will want to know what you mean by "down." What do you mean by heaven? What do you mean by every word in that sentence? The way we talk about Jesus involves too much miracle for the 21st century way of knowing, which declares that every phenomenon, no matter how mysterious, has a natural explanation. The laws of nature rule out the miraculous. The laws of nature are unbendable, unbreakable, inviolable.

He came down from heaven? In all the vast times and spaces of the universe, God – assuming there is a God – chose one little person, on one little planet, at one little moment in time to become one of us? How do you fit divinity into humanity? You don't. A few weeks ago it was time for the annual benefit dinner for Episcopal Charities, the first one since 2019 due to the pandemic. The event is a black-tie occasion, which for me presses the question: how am I doing in the battle against the laws of nature: gravity, time, and calories? Will I still fit into the tuxedo I bought for our wedding back in 1995? It has never been a problem – that is, until this year. Maybe I've had too much meat loaf. Maybe the nineteen of Covid-19 has more than one meaning to it. In any case, to paraphrase St. Paul: *All the fullness I have become was not pleased to dwell in those pants*. I had to wear something else. The pants don't fit. Peace and goodwill still struggle to fit on earth. Divinity does not fit with humanity. He came into his own, and his own received him not. For these reasons and more we meet the skepticism of a skeptical age when we say, He came down from heaven.

Perhaps we need to take a page from the playbook of the shepherds and the wise men. If you recall, they looked to the heavens to discern light in their darkness, and the result was awe, and wonder, and worship. These days we too look to the heavens. In fact, we look to the heavens in ways the wise men and shepherds could not have imagined. One year ago, on Christmas Day 2021, NASA launched the James Webb Telescope. Today, from its perch in deep space, one-million miles from Earth, the telescope is powerful enough to see light so far away that it hasn't yet reached us. In other words, the telescope is looking backwards in time, because long ago and far away are two sides of the same coin in astrophysics.

Likewise, to unfold the great mystery of the Incarnation, the writers of Luke and Matthew encourage us to look backwards in time. They wrote their accounts as if to suggest that the coming of Jesus was no new idea in the mind of God. Matthew traced the lineage of Jesus all the way back to Abraham, thousands of years before him. Luke followed the genealogy of Jesus back even further, all the way to Adam, whom they took to be the representative first human. But it's the writer of John's Gospel who goes back the furthest. In fact, John (1:1-3) traces the existence of Jesus back as far as anyone can possibly go: to the moment of Creation. He wrote: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made*. So John is inviting us to behold God's miraculous, creative handiwork, not only in the birth of Jesus, but in the birth of all things visible and invisible.

Is it possible to go all the way back to the beginning? Cosmologists who peer through the Webb telescope claim to be seeing light from nearly 13-billion years ago. Indeed, the expanding universe we know today actually began as what they call an infinitely dense space-time singularity, when all the fullness of the cosmos was pleased to dwell in a single point, smaller than a period at

the end of a sentence. It was the ultimate tight squeeze. There and then, in the beginning, the laws of nature break down. In other words, the laws that rule out the miraculous hadn't come into play. All the constants that govern the universe only came into being at the miraculous instant of the big bang, when God spoke the Word, *Let there be light*. The miraculous gave birth.

In the beginning, the laws of nature came into being and by their elegance carried with them the hint of a Creator, the Word of God's own existence. Both the laws of nature and the Word of God's existence would come down through the ages, but it would take eons before any conscious creatures emerged to notice such light shining in the darkness. Finally, the Word took hold of a particular people in the calling of Israel. The Word was pleased to dwell with them, and spoke through the prophets. Then in these last days the Word became flesh and lived among us to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world: Jesus, the Son of God. The Nicene Creed puts it this way: *He came down from heaven*. And a recent popular saying puts it this way: *Christmas begins in God's heart. It is complete when it reaches your heart*.

My friend Marie lived to be 102, and I have no doubt that what began in the heart of God found a completion in her. In heart and mind she saw the star, and she would have enjoyed hearing the choir of angels, too. I trust she hears them now on another shore and in a greater light. But let me tell you about someone who claimed to hear them on this side of eternity. He was a clergy mentor of my father's, so probably a contemporary of my grandfather. For years he was the faithful rector of a church that would be his final post. It was a small place in a declining town. The congregation was aging, their voices were thin, they'd had no choir for years. For worship services a volunteer who seemed to have ten thumbs played the wheezing old organ to support the few who sang. It was a banner day if more than a dozen or two attended.

One nondescript Sunday the old priest was at the altar celebrating the Eucharist. He was facing east with his back to the congregation. He came to that familiar portion of the liturgy when he said: *Therefore with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious Name; evermore praising thee, and saying ...* He paused. The organist introduced the Sanctus, as always. And then the singing began. The priest described to my father – who later told me – what he heard. It was hardly the faint singing he'd come to expect. Instead he heard what sounded like a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing: *HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, Lord God of hosts, Heaven and earth are full of thy glory: Glory be to thee, O Lord Most High*. It was a sound stronger and mightier than anything the scattered few in the congregation could have made.

The old priest was not one given to mystical moments. He saw no frequent visions. He was in full possession of his rational mind. So he knew that he was in the presence of Angels and Archangels and all the company of heaven. He said, "That is why I didn't dare turn around. I didn't want my mortal eyes to deceive me."

This year, my prayer is that what begins in the heart of God finds its way to you, and that you hear the message of the angels, and even join their song: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all people*.