

There Are Angels Hoverin' Round

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*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Stars and Angels gave the Sign.*



So, writes Christina Rossetti. Stars and angels, indeed. They gave the sign! So, let's start there. And let's Zoom out first, and I mean way out! All Advent long, we've been sharing images from the James Webb Space Telescope on our bulletin covers. We even created bookmarks with them that are tucked into your hymnbooks. Please take one home tonight if you'd like. Did you know that this school-bus sized technological marvel was launched exactly a year ago tomorrow, on Christmas Day, 2021? And what wonder and joy it has brought us with its mission to discover some of the universe's first light. Never mind that it's powerful enough to show the details on a penny from 24 miles away - that's like seeing the hair on Abe's chin or the coin's year all the way from Foxboro or Gloucester! Never mind that its right now, out there, orbiting the earth, a full 1 million miles away, or that it can see outside the visible spectrum and capture infrared light. What's most astonishing is that it's just begun to send us images from thousands and millions and even billions of light-years ago. Behold the one on your bulletin cover tonight - the Carina Nebula - a relatively close astral phenomenon - from just 7500 light years ago? Amazing right? By the way, one light year, distance-wise, is 5.9 trillion miles away! And Webb has already sent images of entire galaxies that are 4.6 billion light years away, which means we are seeing things happening in our present moment that happened before the earth or Sun even existed! Mind-boggling stuff, right? And the plan is to see as far as back as 13.5 billion light years, *almost* to the Big Bang itself!

Look up at the stars, those cosmic and radiant signs of the very ground of our being, all that star-dusty molecular stuff from which we too are made, and we are on our way to receiving the Christmas gift of God's universe-embracing love that comes down tonight! These images set us in the mood and create the scale of awe and wonder for what happens at Christmas, and yet they come from so far away, so long ago. They are so distant, so literally out there. On a night like tonight, it helps to start by zooming way out to what transcends the limits of reason and even time itself. After all, we are talking about God's infinite, unconditional, and eternal love, and nothing is greater! Yet if Christmas invites us to go wide, it surely invites us to focus in, too. Cue the angels! As our story goes, as Lorraine just so beautifully read and as Sarah talked about, something else lit up the sky that night when a glory shone round! A brightness, a radiant vision, this time with sound too, of singing and praise! It's as if all of that universal wonder and astral beauty gets channeled into these angelic figures that draw near and hover round on this night of nights! The angels, or whatever we might call these signs of divine presence, break through and enter into the field and the narrative quality of our day-to-day *human* experience from a different plane of being altogether. They arrest our attention with their heavenly singing every year. If

you are tempted, try not to get hung up on whether the angels are factually “real”! As a friend of mine likes to say: don't be so literal! Instead, try to listen for a sense of truth that speaks through the story. Something happens when the angels come - they move Elizabeth and Mary and the shepherds and move us, too, when we sing with them! Maybe this year especially - after coming through so much turmoil, isolation, anxiety, and grief - did you know that nearly 200,000 high schoolers lost a parent during Covid? – maybe this year especially, we too need to let them draw near to us, again or for the first time. I wonder, truly, if there aren't angels we have heard - already! Think about it. In our lives, in our stories, those who had seemingly swept as if from out of nowhere, bearing with them some message of comfort, challenge, hope, or nourishment just when we needed it most? If nothing else, I wonder who those angels we need to hear right now are.

One-time Dean of BU's Marsh Chapel and mentor of Martin Luther King, Howard Thurman captures the theme just about perfectly, I think, when he writes:

There must be...remaining in every [person's] life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful...something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright light of penetrating beauty and meaning—then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory; old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. ...Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.

May it be so! The miraculous stars shining through light years of space and time are signs of Christmas, to be sure, and the angels, too, sweetly singing and piercing their way into the mundane and sometimes harsh realities of our daily lives. These signs guide us to the love and truth we are invited to behold this night.

There's one more quick angel story I need to share from a short play by Thornton Wilder called “The Angel that Troubled the Water.” Shout out here to Thornton's brother, Amos Niven Wilder, who was a member for many years until he died in the early 90s. Amos is honored by a bench in his name on our lawn which makes me wonder if Brother Thornton joined him in these pews on a Christmas Eve, but I digress! In the play, Wilder introduces several characters gathering at the Pool of Bethesda where an angel of healing is said to visit periodically.

As the drama opens a newcomer is waiting at the pool, a physician, who unlike the others, bears no obvious signs of infirmity. Still he cries out repeatedly: “Come, long expected Love!” The angel soon appears in shimmering, tremulous light. Kneeling... down on the lowest step and meditatively holding his finger poised above the shuddering water, the angel speaks: “Joy and fulfillment, completion, content, rest and release have been promised.” Hmmm. The newcomer can hardly wait. Then the angel pauses and turns to him, “Draw back, physician, this moment is not for you.” The doctor, surprised, starts to argue: “Surely, surely the angels are wise. Surely ...you are not deceived by my apparent

wholeness. ...the sin into which all my endeavors sink half-performed cannot be concealed from you." The angel says simply, "I know." The physician renews his plea. The angel explains: "Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of [others]. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the [woeful] and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service only, the wounded soldiers can serve. Draw back." And the doctor does just that.

I find this amazingly poignant, and it beautifully captures what we celebrate here tonight. Even the angels can't do what one human being broken on the wheels of living can do! How can they understand? And here we come to what the signs of have been pointing to - to what it means that God's love has come down at Christmas! Down from the stars! Down from the angels. Down into the form of one human being who can see into the depths our human hearts with an almost telescopic like clarity.

Tonight, we are invited to behold a star! And oh my, thanks to James Webb Space Telescope, have we ever? Tonight, we hear the voices of angels, imploring us: Behold, fear not, we've got good news! And we say, yes, please God, we need to hear it ...for a change! And where do these great and wondrous they lead us? Of all places, to a makeshift manger and to a tiny child born of Mary, that is, to a poor, humble, vulnerable, embodied channel of human being and human brokenness! And therein lies the power! God's love reaching out from galaxies that are zillions of miles and billions of light years away, and through angel's songs that hover round, comes down to us in a human being, in a child who meets us where we are, as we are, right here on earth, in the midst of our woeful, blundering and broken yet somehow still beautifully human ways. Yes, God reaches out, way out, to imbue every corner of the universe with beauty and yet at Christmas God reaches in, too - to touch every corner of every depth of every heart with divine love and healing.

Friends, Christmas is our chance to behold the wonder and love it all - from the stars to the angels to the little baby Jesus to the fierce, justice-minded, world-transforming spiritual leader and revolutionary that he was and is! It's our chance to imagine us holding him and loving on him! And it's our chance to imagine God holding and beholding each of us, in all of the depth and far reaches of our human being and human brokenness and human beauty! What response do we have but to sing our joy and praise and to say bring on the stars and angels keep them coming?

Let us behold it all now and let us be held together by that love divine that comes to meet us right where we are!