

In the late 1800s, a congregation in England needed new hymn books but lacked the money to pay for them. The churchgoers learned that a large company, a maker of patent medicines, would furnish hymn books at a penny each if the books could carry some advertising.

The congregation saw no harm in making that concession, and so they ordered the books. The new hymnals arrived at the church on the day before Christmas. On Christmas, the cantor announced, 'Hymn #138.' The people turned to the hymn, and in a few seconds were aghast to find themselves singing:

Hark! The herald angels sing

Beecham's pills are just the thing;

Peace on earth and mercy mild,

Two for man, and one for child.

Thank God Greg decided to go for the no advertising option in our hymnbooks!

Angels are a big part of the Christmas story. Here theologian John Shea has an angel speak to us, in a piece he entitles CRECHE CHARACTERS ASK QUESTIONS: "You often position me on the roof of the stable and that perch is perfect. I am accustomed to sky and sight, seeing from above sees more. So allow me to confirm your suspicion. There is more going on in our creche than your earthbound squint can detect. I am the winged reminder to open your myopia into mystery. Angels are many. And you should know we show up in more ways than you can imagine and when you least expect. Sometimes we appear in out-of-the-way villages and engage in persuasive spiritual conversations as Mary found out. Sometimes we visit dreams and plant plans of protection as we did with Joseph, who reached for his staff on awakening, or issue night warnings and redirections as we did with the wise men, who bypassed Herod on their way home. Sometimes we announce births and destinies as the shepherds, who watch over sheep at night, can attest. Yes, we sing. But heavenly choirs are overrated and often off-key. We know only one song, 'Glory to God in the Highest and peace among people of good will.' Connecting God and people is the famous dance we do on the famous head of that famous pin.

I hope this helps you to know us. I am sure you have guessed, even with these few words, our presence raises the stakes. The eternal is taking a hand in time. Your creche harbors glory. You are probably asking, 'Why is this angel so garrulous? Why am I being told all this?' My only answer is: I have been sent. I am your Christmas gift. Will you risk spiritual guidance?" (John Shea, SEEING HALOES, Liturgical Press, 2017, p. 39-41)

I'm moving on with the assumption that we ARE, in fact, willing to risk some spiritual guidance as we celebrate Christmas. And I would suggest that most of the guidance comes in images, and work in flashes. We see for a moment, then we don't. All image-induced experience is transitory, beginning and ending and leaving us to deal with the aftermath. Spiritual experience and faith are no exception. Indeed, they are probably the premier examples. The Christian symbol of spiritual experience is the angel. In the stories, angels arrive unexpectedly and depart suddenly, leaving people to scramble about with their new insights and commissions. We even gate that a fancy theological term – to PONDER. Mary is heading with haste through the hills to Elizabeth, shepherds are on the move to find a child; Joseph is bundling up his family and is on the

run from Herod. That is how it is with spiritual experience and the images that express and evoke them. They come and go, and we can decide either to forget them (“That was no angel, I think I drank too much spiked eggnog!” or puzzle and pray about them – PONDER (“What did he mean ‘reign over the house of David?’) (STARLIGHT, John Shea, p. 38-39) My homily is a suggestion to do the latter – puzzle and pray and ponder.

So, second, Christmas requires of us what could be called a ‘deep heart.’ By calling it ‘deep,’ it will not be confused with the visible functioning of the physical organ known as the heart. As one image develops the ‘deep heart,’ it has 2 eyes: one peers into the eternal and one peers into the temporal. Deep heart consciousness is holistic, holding together body and soul, spirit and flesh, the transcendent and the finite, which is the heart of our faith in the Incarnation of Christ, the enfleshment of God.

When we coincide with our deep heart, we know we are in profound mystery. We sense a life-giving communion with the Source of Life and an interdependent connection with all people, living and dead, and all of creation. Living out of a deep heart, we see and hear the outer world as an interactive unity, revealing flows of life and love we might otherwise miss. That makes ‘deep heart’ consciousness different from conventional consciousness, a welcome relief to seeing everything and everyone as separate and on their individual paths of flourishing and decline.

Christmas is an invitation to this deep heart consciousness, a feast and a season of these manifestations of Spirit. We honor and behold this truth by extending it into everything we think and do. We decorate our homes and ourselves, (despite the UGLY CHRISTMAS SWEATER CONTESTS – which have their place too!), celebrate around food and drink with family and friends, receive and give gifts, participate in liturgies, listen to music, watch movies, send out cards, and loyally reenact ethnic and family traditions – all in the hope that we will become aware of Spirit uplifting flesh, of light shining in the darkness.

Of course, the foundation of this season and feast of the manifestations of Spirit is one of the core convictions of Christian faith – the Eternal Word has become flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. W.H. Auden, in FOR THE TIME BEING: A CHRISTMAS ORATORIO, drew out the implication: “Because of His visitation we no longer desire God as if He were lacking. Our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but of surrender to the ONE who is always and everywhere present.” Both we and our world are more than we know and there are times when this more flashes forth into the familiar, when the truth of the Word becoming flesh breaks through the restrictions of our consciousness. Christmas not only celebrates these experiences. The season and feast try to facilitate them.

But one of the major obstacles to beholding the manifestations of Spirit, to dwelling, even momentarily, in deep heart consciousness, is the pace of our lives. We are too busy. During December, everyday chores escalate, and seasonal obligations are piled on to our already full schedules. There is no time to slow down and invite deep heart consciousness. Besides, even if we took time, just how do we go about welcoming this different awareness? What can bring it about?

Words that come from the fleeting awareness – humble words, broken words, overly ambitious words, words that simultaneously say too much and too little, words that betray the truth they desire to reveal, words whose real home is silence, words that laugh at what the mind thinks it knows, words that bow before what the soul intuits, words that will not look away until a situation has yielded the truth it wants to tell...

In short, the words of the Christmas scriptures and stories and legends that we have come to treasure in this giant, lovely hodgepodge of faith in a God who came among us, A God who became FLESH. A God who became LIKE US. (Adapted from John Shea, SEEING HALOES, p. xi-xiii)

And third, and finally, all of these images and the reflections of a deep-heart consciousness take us to the heart of the mystery, which is God, which is love. In the mystery of the Incarnation, Love is handing our heart to someone and taking the risk that they will hand it back because they don't want it. That's why it's such a crushing ache on the inside. We gave away a part of ourselves and it wasn't wanted.

Love is a giving away of power. When we love, we give the other person a certain power in the relationship. They can do what they choose. They can do what they like with our love. They can reject it, they can accept it, they can step toward us in gratitude and appreciation, they can turn around and leave.

Love is giving up control. It's surrendering the desire to control the other person. The two-- love and controlling power over the other person -- are mutually exclusive. If we are serious about loving someone, we have to surrender all of the desires within us to manipulate the relationship.

So if you were God -- which I realize is an odd way for a preacher to begin a sentence -- but if you were God, the all-powerful creator of the universe, and you wanted to move toward people, you wanted to express your love for the world in a new way, how would you do it?

If you showed up in your power and control and might, you would scare people off. This is what happens at the giving of the Ten Commandments. The first 2 commandments are in the first person: "You shall have no other gods before *me*. You shall not make for yourself any image, for *I*, the Lord..." But starting with the third commandment, someone else is talking: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord *your* God, for the Lord..." The rabbis believed that this is because God was speaking directly to the people in the first 2 commands, but they couldn't handle it. As it says in the text, "They trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'" So, the rabbis reasoned, the switch in person is because Moses gave them the remaining 8 commandments.

Just God speaking is too much to bear.

If you're God, and you want to express ultimate love to your creation, if you want to move toward them in a definitive way, you have a problem, because just showing up scares the pants off of everybody.

You wouldn't come as you are.

You wouldn't come in strength.

You wouldn't come in your pure, raw essence. We'd all die of fright. We'd all head for the hills.

The last thing people would perceive is love.

So how would you express your love in an ultimate way? How do you connect with people in a manner that wouldn't scare them off but would compel them to want to come closer, to draw nearer?

You would need to strip yourself of all of the trappings that come with ultimate power and authority. That's how love works. It doesn't matter if a man has ten million dollars and wants to woo a woman, if she loves him for his money, it isn't really love.

If you were an almighty being who made the universe and everything in it, you would need to meet people on their level, in their world, on their soil....like them.

This is the story of the Bible. This is the story of Christmas. This is the story of love. (Adapted from Rob Bell, *Sex God*, 2007, p. 98-100)

In his classic Christmas story *THE STORY OF THE OTHER WISE MAN*, Henry van Dyke wrote of keeping Christmas not just one day but every day: “Are you willing to believe that love is the strongest thing in the world – stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death – and that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem....all those years ago is the image and brightness of Eternal Love? Then,” said Van Dyke, “you can keep Christmas, and if you can keep it for a day, why not always?” Why not, indeed?” (adapted from *PREACHING RESOURCES*, 19 December 2004, p. 553) Amen.

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