

Christmas Eve ~ December 24, 2016

**"AND ON EARTH"**

by Mary Anne Biggs

My favorite place that John and I ever lived in Texas was in the hill country just outside of town. You could see for miles and miles and miles and if you looked up the sky was always filled with stars. On the night of a predicted meteor shower our son and I stayed out most of the night just watching. We saw some pretty neat things, but mostly we just talked. It was one the best nights of my life.

Actually, I think it's good to stop your busy routine once in a while and just stare at the sky. Day or night, it's something to behold. Whether the heavens are filled with stars ... or the bright blue expanse ... or even billowing clouds scudding along, looking up reminds you that God's world is bigger than you are ... bigger than your plans and dreams ... bigger than your worries or fears.

That's what we do whenever we worship, of course ... we look up. Here at First Congregational UCC we go up the stairs or ride the elevator ... we climb to the mountain top ... we come to the upper room to be closer to God. And here, we look up from ourselves ... we look up from our world ... we look up ... to look to God. And that is never more true than at Christmas.

Christmas *makes* us look up. We behold the silent night ... upon a midnight clear ... and see the twinkling of ten thousand points of fire ... and remember the words of the Psalmist, "*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*" (Psa 8:3-4). We see the brightest star, the herald of glad tidings. "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- on them light has shined*" (Isa 9:2). And then, still gazing skyward, we see ... we hear ... the angels singing the very first Christmas Cantata ... "*Glory to God in the highest!*"

"The highest" means the highest places, that is, heaven. And even though our science has moved us beyond thinking that heaven is up and hell is down, we still naturally think in those categories, like the ancient authors of the Bible did. We want to be "up" ... we loathe feeling "down." We tell someone, "Things are looking up" ... or "I'm going down the tubes." We say, "He's a stand-up guy" ... or "She's a dirty, low-down snake." In our minds, up is good ... down is bad ... and Christmas lets us look up for a change. When I look to the sky at Christmas, it's not hard for me to see and hear and feel what the celebration is all about.

But I know that there are many others, perhaps even a few of you here tonight, who may feel more down than up this Christmas. The world has a way of grounding us and forcing our eyes downward. And, I especially want to speak to you tonight ... and even to those who are up at the moment ... because we all know that life is a roller coaster ride of ups and downs ... and that those down times will surely come. What I want to say is that Christmas is even more about down ... than it is about up. Christmas is about God coming down to us ... meeting us where we live ... coming to earth to be with us in our lowest ... as well as our highest moments.

Tonight I am remembering a journey to prison that John and I made for many years during this time of year. I've never been to hell, but I've been inside many a Texas prison and I'm willing to bet they have a lot in common. We had a makeshift chapel made from canvas room dividers because the prison chapel was locked tighter than a prison cell. We filled it with metal folding chairs that had to be chained together in case someone decided to weaponize them. The room was packed with over 100 women, mostly African American and Hispanic. I was standing near the front, busying myself in a Martha sort of way ... wanting to make sure that everyone had a bulletin so that the service could proceed without a hitch. When suddenly, from the back of the room came a heavenly voice. I looked up to see who was singing and recognized a "sister in white" who had been in my small group for three days. I recognized her face of course, but I would never have recognized her voice because she had not uttered one single word during those three days. She had obstinately remained silent, with her large arms folded across her ample chest ... glaring at me with angry, defiant eyes, just daring me to encourage her to speak. And here she was, singing "Silent Night" with tears streaming down her face. Before long, others joined in ... and I don't care how many hours the Mormon Tabernacle Choir spends rehearsing ... they will never sound as sweet, and as pure as that spontaneous concert from those "sisters in white." I had the good sense to toss the bulletins and just let them sing ... and sing they did! It was mid-day on January 1<sup>st</sup>, but it was Christmas Eve, you know, because Christmas is really a place in the heart more than a date on the calendar.

I've never been to Bethlehem, but my brother was just there and he told me that the traditional site of Jesus' birth is actually a cave, a grotto, under the church, under the ground. Knowing my propensity for falling flat on my face, he didn't recommend it for me because he said that you have to go down steep stairs worn smooth with no handrails to get to it. Then you have to kneel beneath an altar to see the niche where a fourteen pointed silver star is inscribed in Latin "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary."

Here is one of Christendom's holiest sites, and you have to stoop and descend and kneel to see it. How appropriate, because this is the place where God came down to be with us. That is the message of Christmas ... just as much as looking up to see the star ... and being lifted up by the music of angels. It is, "*Glory to God in the highest,*" yes, but it is also a word concerning "*peace on earth.*" In the muck and mire of human life ... with the poor family struggling to survive ... with the lost and lonely and blind and lame and sick and imprisoned ... in the mortal woes of all flesh, God is with us. So whether you feel high or low tonight, hear "*the good news of glad tidings which shall be to all people*" - God is with you. God is with you. God is with us ... all of us!

The song of the angels, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,*" reminds us of the Lord's Prayer ... "*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" This division goes all the way back to Genesis one when God separated the heavens and the earth ... where humanity was created of earth ... formed from the dust of the ground ... yet drawing breath by the Spirit of God. Later in Genesis ... when humankind tries to break with the earth and ascend to the status of God's heaven by building a tower ... God thwarts their plan and divides them into many warring tribes and languages. But in Luke, it is God who breaches the heavens and the earth by coming to us with a message of peace for all persons. The story of the

Tower of Babel is about human arrogance. The story of the Nativity is about God's humility ... and God's desire that we should have peace.

But God's desire and our present reality seem miles and miles and miles apart. There is no peace on earth ... we do not have good will among all people. The angel's song rings empty. Is anything in the world different because of Christmas?

Are we to take the angel's message as idealistic words to make us feel good for a moment, but meaning precisely nothing? Are they an apocalyptic announcement delivered in the prophetic perfect tense ... meaning that even though there is no peace and good will now ... someday, at the end ... when God calls in all our markers, finally there will be peace? Are we to believe that God will do it ... so we can count on it ... so the angels speak as if it were already so? Perhaps ... but I believe that the words of the angel are as much an imperative as an indicative. They are calling us to do God's will on earth as it is in heaven. And what is God's will on earth? Peace ... good will to all people.

Is anything in the world different because of Christmas? I think that's the wrong question. The real question is, are you different because of Christmas? Has God been born in you ... so that you bear the love of God in your soul? Is God with you so that you are God's change agent in a world that needs changing? Is God in your flesh so that you have peace ... love peace ... make peace ... and work for good will to all people? What on earth has changed because of Christmas? Nothing ... and everything, if we are changed ... if we who call ourselves by the name of the Prince of Peace finally believe in peace ... and practice it.

So tonight, let us look up together and be lifted to the heavens by the story of the star and the angels and the sheer glory of Christmas. But let us also stoop low ... kneel in humility ... and ground this Christmas message in the reality of our world. Let us worship glad-hearted in this high place, but let us go down the stairs and out the door bold-hearted into a world that needs light to overcome its darkness ... and love to overcome its hostilities. Whether we feel high or low, let us rejoice in the good news that Christ is born into our hearts ... that God is with us here and now in the regular stuff of our daily lives. But let us also respond to the calling of Christmas ... the great invitation to be about God's work in the name of Christ. My friends, on this Christmas Eve look up ... but also look down. Do you see what I see? God is with us. Hallelujah! Glory to God in the highest, and on earth!

May we pray?

Light of the world,

Burn brightly among us tonight. Come down to the low places and to the people who sit in darkness. Be born into the midst of our sinfulness, our hostility, our struggle, our fear, our confusion, our loneliness, our bitterness, our sorrow, our strife. Be born in the midst of this hard, cold, real world, so that by your love it might be transformed. Be born within us, among us, so that we might be transformed and carry your light to the world. Be born in our hearts again tonight, and give us peace. Amen.