

Heavens And Earth!

Luke 2:17

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"HEAVENS AND EARTH!"

"...All who heard it were astonished at the story of the shepherds." Luke 2:17 (Moffatt)

In spite of all the marvels of our age we are a complacent people. Perhaps it is because of these things that it is so hard for us to be impressed. I remember seeing Thornton Wilder's play, "The Skin of Our Teeth." In the first act the principal character Mr. Antribus comes in with a wheel. He has just invented it and is very enthusiastic as he tells what can be accomplished by his new gadget. Every day we read of things so much more wonderful and take these things in our stride. We took our boys to New York once when they were young. I so wanted ~~these~~ their faces when they saw some of the things I had seen. The day before we left their uncle took them up in a ~~plane~~. There was a rather large plane that was visiting the area and taking up passengers. What an anti-climax New York was! I took them up on the Empire State Building. They replied, "We were up higher than this yesterday!" As a matter of fact everything was overshadowed by that plane ride. There is a story going the rounds about a theatrical agent who had seen everything and could not be impressed. A man came into his office one day and begged him to come to a theatre so that he could

show him what he could do. The agent finally consented. They went into this ~~empty~~ theatre. The actor took off his coat and said, "Now watch!" And then he leaped into the air, ~~sped~~ around the stage, out into the theatre, up over over the balcony and after a few ~~hair-raising~~ turns ~~land~~ lightly at the feet of the agent. The agent yawned and said, "So you imitate birds, what else can you do?" It seems to me this is a good parable of the times. The wonder has gone out of life.

The New Testament is a book of astonishment.

Let me read you some verses I have picked at random from the Gospels. "And all were astonished at the ^{Luke 9:43} ~~majesty~~ of God." "And they were utterly astonished." ^{Mark 6:51} ~~the crowds~~ were astonished at his teaching" (Matt. 7:28) "When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished..." (Matt. 19:25) "And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished..." (Mark 6:2)

Gronin in "Adventures In Two Worlds" writes: "Then I turned and went back toward the little faithful beacon which still burned at the side altar in the no longer empty church. One candle in a ruined city. But while it shone there seemed hope for the world." We are looking for that today. We are looking for hope for the world. It has been said "that the curse of our

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world is not so apt to be its evil as its disillusionment. We grow cynical because we have been disappointed and hurt. So much has happened in our world yet it has brought about so little! In spite of our achievements in space we have not yet conquered ourselves. What difference does it make if I know enough to send a rocket to the moon yet cannot find happiness in my own home? Basically today we are looking for the same sort of thing which shepherds, and sages, and humble people were looking for 1900 years ago. *But we must do this in the context of a new world.*

The purpose of Christmas is to help us remember a personality. It is to remind us that the historical appearance of Christ gives human life its ultimate meaning. What a truth it reveals! That God enters history—not as an observer, to watch—not as a dictator to control—but rather as a Man to participate in the historical process itself. What an astonishing thing! What a wonderful thing! There is an expression which some people use when they are very astonished -- "Heavens and earth!" I realized the other day that this was a perfect expression of our wonder and astonishment at Christmas -- "Heavens and earth" -- that sums it all up. Our life is now a unity. It is not a question of the Divine over here and the Human over there. The Divine has entered life.

The Christmas revelation not only challenges our complacency it also challenges our values. G. K. Chesterton wrote:

"The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than all the square stones of Rome."

The revelation comes not in a palace, but in a stable. Perhaps today we should say—not in a laboratory but in a heart. The revelation explodes before mankind not in an atom or hydrogen bomb, but in the face of a child. The Christian revelation is a direct challenge to all of the values of our day. The words which mean much today are bigness, and power, and force, and efficiency. I heard some people talking, "You know what they say is out of this world?" I pricked up my ears. I wanted to know what was out of this world. They finished the sentence: "You know what they say is out of this world?—it is that show they put on in Radio City at Christmas. You know with the Rockettes—and everything." How foreign to the basic idea of Christmas is the idea of a "big show".

The words of the "Magnificat" taken from the first chapter of Luke have it:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.... He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away."

Here many of our values are toppled and reversed. Remember that the Christmas story was written or told by people who knew Jesus and they could think of Him only in a humble setting. It is not the tallest Christmas tree, it is not the most expensive present, it is not the most lavish pageant that reveals the spirit of Christ. If Christ dwells in our hearts we value the grain of mustard seed, the heaven, love, sacrifice. Do not let the angels sing to you, do not let the light of the star shine into your room unless you are willing to have your lives turned upside down. "Heavens and earthy I never thought of that!"

The third astonishing thing about Christmas is that it demands that we relate our own lives to this great revelation. A few years ago I had the responsibility for some broadcasting. One Christmas I wrote a radio program and had the RFI Glee Club do the musical part. It was impossible for the Club to be present when we wanted to do the program so we recorded the whole thing on tape. Next Christmas we

wanted to use a great portion of the program, but with some variation, so we recorded those portions which we wanted on another tape and played that. Now we had a recording of a recording. Christmas has gone on like that for some of us year after year so that this year we have a recording, of a recording, of a recording, of a recording -- you go on. There was a time when the Christmas story was fresh and vital and real and astonishing. Now it is a matter of getting down tarnished ornaments for a drooping tree.

My job today is not to retell the Christmas story, you have heard that dozens of times. My job today is not to give a learned exegesis of a Christmas text. My job is to convince you that all of this has some meaning for your life. The whole message of Christmas is lost until you are confronted with it. This is not to say that you have not been busy with many things usually associated with Christmas. You may have been so busy with good things that you have not heard eternal voices.

Did you ever notice that it was to Joseph and Mary that the shepherds first told the good tidings which had been revealed to them? Heavens and earth didn't they know? The record says, "AND WHEN THEY (the shepherds) SAW IT THEY MADE IT KNOWN THE SAYING WHICH HAD BEEN TOLD THEM CONCERNING THIS CHILD." A long time ago

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I asked myself the question, "Did Mary and Joseph see the star and hear the angels sing?" Of course they didn't. Joseph was hunting a lodging and I don't think he stopped because he had secured temporary quarters in a stable. Mary was much too concerned about the demands of birth to look towards the sky. Now it was over and Joseph and Mary and the new born Babe were by themselves. Then the excited shepherds burst into the stable. Rough men, faces seamed, wearing the clothes of their trade. Humble men, not accustomed to courts and kings. Men who dealt with the cold and beasts and stupid sheep. These men told their amazing story of the heavenly message. And all who heard it were astonished. Luke has been trying to tell us that this new faith about which he is writing was born in a burst of astonishment and amazement at the fact that heaven now confronts earth, that God confronts man, here and now

"O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in,
Be born in us today!
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!"

All through the ages men have been trying to express the meaning of this for their own lives.

THE BOY WITHOUT A NAME
(from "The Story of Christmas"—R.J. Campbell p. 36)

Long, long ago there was a boy who worked at an inn. We do not know his name. He was the boy-of-all-work. It was his task to look after the cattle, and to do odd jobs at the inn. There came a time when there was a great stir at this inn, for the little town was full of travellers, and the inn was overcrowded. Among these was a tired woman and a man with a trouble look. The stable boy heard them pleading with the landlord. The landlord was kind but firm, and said, "I should like to take you into the inn, but it is quite impossible. I have already turned many away."

The boy slipped away and said to himself, "They will find their way to the stable. I will make it sweet and clean for them." So he ran and made everything as tidy as possible, and put clean, fresh, sweet-smelling hay in the manger, and then he went back to the inn, for there was much work for him to do there.

Some time after he slipped out and beheld a strange light in the stable. There he saw the two tired pilgrims, and, a babe—lying in a manger in the warm, fresh, sweet-smelling hay. All was clean, tidy and the man and the woman and the child looked so happy. The boy was glad and said, "I put the hay there on which the baby sleeps. No one knows; it is better when nobody knows."

Back again he ran to his work and whistled for sheer joy as he bustled about. Night fell—a clear night, full of stars. The boy slipped out and ran to the stable. Amazement fell upon him. There were shepherds kneeling and they were all gazing with joyous astonishment at the babe lying in the manger. They spoke of the heavenly light, of the song of angels, of tidings of great joy to all people. No one noticed the boy for he hid himself in the darkness. But he saw all, and as he lay down to rest he said, "I placed the hay there for the wonderful child. No one knows; it is better when nobody knows."

Again he worked hard all day but not until night came was he able. Then he ran and wonder of wonders, he saw kindly pilgrims kneeling in adoration before the manger. They talked of a star they had seen in the East, of long journeys and of the wondrous joy which was theirs in worshipping the babe. They brought forth beautiful gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh. The little boy knelt in the shadows and worshipped and rejoiced, and said, "What beautiful gifts...but mine was FIRST for I

came before the shepherds and the distant travellers and tidied the stable, and brought the present of clean fresh, sweet-smelling hay. I am glad I was the first to bring a gift and that love led me to make a warm bed for the babe. No one knows; it is better when nobody knows. And no man or woman or child would have ever known had not an angel told me this Christmastide story; but even he did not mention the name of the boy, but always called him "the boy without a name."

Christmas candle - every other candle is here to make this one

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Well, have you committed your life? Will you be any different because of it all? Will Christ dwell in your hearts through faith? An unknown boy acts kindly and without thought for himself. Shepherds bowed in adoration. Wise men brought forth treasures. Albert Schweitzer is in Africa.

"Out of our crowded lives we come
Chanting our Christmas songs
Gentle and kind, with a Christlike mind
Joining the reverent throngs.
Back into life again we go
Back where he strives with men
When hate blasphemes and lust tramples his dreams
Say....will we serve Him then?"

Our problem is that we should be living with good things and still hear eternal voices. It is not by chance that the shepherds were tending their sheep when the voices came. Probably many good people were engaged in many good activities but they did not hear.

