

Christmas Morning B
December 25, 2017

Grace Church, Lexington
Fr. James

Light, Joy and Peace

When I think fondly of Christmas Eve, I think of beauty, family and harmony. I take these themes from a good friend of mine, the theologian Gerald McDermott. Gerry and another man have recently written an 800 page tome on the theology of Jonathan Edwards, the nineteenth century theologian who was a significant figure in leading the Great Awakening in that century.

Edwards great contribution is that without beauty God would not be God. And an essential part of that beauty is the holiness of God. The Christian life is drawn by the beauty of God. And it is fundamental to Jonathan Edward's thinking because it is centered in the heart, part of the affections and these include feelings, mind and will—all part of the heart or as we so often say today, the soul. It is not hard to be drawn by the beauty of God on Christmas Eve. Even the unbeliever wants to believe in mystery, love, joy and peace on this most holy night.

The year was 1953, and the Korean War was drawing to a

close. U.S. soldiers stationed around Korea didn't have much to do as they waited for the armistice negotiations to wrap up. Hugh Keenan was a young sailor assigned to the U.S.S. Consolation, a medical ship. Morale was low on the ship, and like many of his buddies, Hugh was homesick. He had a wife and daughter back in the States, and he was desperate to return to them. Someone suggested that Hugh might get a lift from visiting a local Korean orphanage run by Catholic nuns.

As Hugh toured the orphanage, eager little faces peered at him. The nuns ran the place with very little money, but a lot of faith and resourcefulness. Apple crates served as cribs for many of the babies. One baby in particular caught Hugh's eye. He was a biracial baby, part American and part Korean; such a child would surely face prejudice in Korean society. A lieutenant and the skipper from Hugh's ship were visiting the orphanage, too, and they decided to find a good home for the child in America.

But until the Consolation could return to the States, the baby boy would have to live on the ship. Instantly, morale on the

ship shot up. The sailors set up baby-sitting shifts, so that all the men would get a chance to feed, change, bathe, or watch after the little boy. Some of the men fashioned homemade toys for the child. They hung his cloth diapers out to dry with the ship's signal flags, which proved confusing to a number of passing ships. Everyone took an interest in this new child and his well-being.

When Hugh Keenan finally stepped forward and offered to adopt the child, the ship's crew burst into cheers. But there was still the matter of getting his official papers signed, and the Korean bureaucracy moved extremely slowly. So the ship's chaplain, Father Riley, took matters into his own hands. He set up a poker game between himself and an official of the Korean government. The Father put up \$200 of his own money for the game. The ship's doctor donated his watch, a precious family heirloom, to sweeten the pot. And the Korean official brought a passport for the baby. Whoever won the game would get everything in the pot. Father Riley won.

Hugh Keenan took his son home and named him Daniel

Edward Keenan. The Daniel comes from Hugh's father's name.

Edward was the first name of Father Riley. Daniel grew up a happy child, in a stable and loving home. When Daniel was seven, Hugh told him the story of his adoption. In 1993, veterans from Hugh's ship came together for a reunion, and Daniel was brought in as a "surprise guest," now 40 years old. The men were thrilled to see him, thrilled that their little boy-the child they had cared for-had grown to be a fine man. They all felt they had a part in raising him.

"Baby on Board," by Michael A. Lipton and Paula Yoo, *People*, December 8, 1997, p. 137-140. Beauty and God are inseparable, wherever we find it.

Family are more removed than they once were at Christmas, and that is a big loss. For each of you who is experiencing that loss, I share it. But the sense of family is reinforced, perhaps even defined by the inner relationships within the Trinity which is God. There beauty, community and harmony are born, exemplified and reflected by secondary beauty as seen in the natural world and even music, and other arts co-created by

human participants in the holiness of God. And within this community, the church, we can begin to taste what it must be like to be God, that is, what for God is the joy and peace and delight to be in relationship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Occasionally, in life we have relationships that reflect that truest of relationships, that within the God head itself. It may be with a spouse, it may be with a child, it may be with a soul-friend, it may be within the family of God, a community like Grace Church. Paul has another designation for the Christian community and that is 'body of Christ.' For him the church is the incarnate Christ in the world. Not the priest, not the Warden or Chair of the ECW, but the church, that community is actually Jesus Christ in the world. Third, harmony is a part of the beauty of God. Harmony may be illustrated by music, or by what we see of the world through a beautifully falling snow storm, or by peace between friends in the home or the church or even between nations. We see it in the reminder of that first Christmas, that first Christ mass. There is no more beautiful experience for any of us than to see and hold a

newborn. So beautiful and portentous that even the heavenly realms could not keep silent. The angels were out telling even poor shepherds and serenading them with music telling out the glory of God, the glory being that light which is visible in the very presence of God, the source and origin of all beauty.

I remember reading on two occasions a book about Kalihari Bushmen, the little people of Africa who live out in a desert so spare that no other people can survive there. They survive, and left alone by other human communities, they thrive. One of their great joys is listening at night to the music of the stars. So silent is the desert and so vast the proscenium of that stage that even the stars can be heard to sing by ears attuned to them. There is a harmony so vast and beautiful that it brings to these people a vision of a benevolent universe, part of Jonathan Edwards Natural Theology.

I was reading recently in Isaiah 64 [3,4] these words, words that were Isaiah's praise directly to God:

From ages past no one has heard,

no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

This is an outgrowth of a theology soaked in beauty, wrapped in praise and harmony, and beribboned by the words of one who knows he is part of the family of the living God.

In a human relationship I was touched by a story told by Henri Nouwen, professor at Yale, a man at whose feet I sat for one night only. Dr. Nouwen told the story of a student who, many years after graduation, returned to sit in his old professor's office where so many questions had been answered and so many problems had been solved. When the student entered he told his professor that he didn't need anything, he came just to visit, to be together. They sat for a while in silence and looked at each other. One broke the silence by telling the other how nice it was to see each other. The other agreed, and then there was silence. Then the

student said, "When I look at you it is as if I am in the presence of Christ." The professor remembers that did not startle or surprise him and that he could only respond with, "It is the Christ in you who recognizes the Christ in me." The student replied with the most healing words Nouwen had heard in many years. "Yes, Christ indeed is in our midst. From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground." And

Then Came The Angel, William B. Kincaid, III, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.

In one experience we can see love, respect, healing, forgiveness, holiness, and vision and know in the most intimate way that it is all of God.

William Stidger in his little book *Sermon Nuggets in Stories*, tells of his friend Fritz Kreisler, the great violinist who told this story to Mr. Stidger in his own home, outside of Berlin, in Grunewald, just before the II World War. I had crossed on the "Bremen" with him, and since his stateroom was next to mine we had sat many hours talking. When we got to Berlin he invited me to his home for lunch, and it was there that he told me this story

about his favorite violin..

Years before, he had heard of a famous Heart Guarnerius violin which had been sold to a collector. It was a priceless treasure, and he wanted it for his own, but the collector refused to part with it for any sum. He was adamant against Kriesler's pleas.

“That that divine voice should be doomed to silence under the glass case of a collector was a tragedy that tore my heart apart,” said Kreisler as he told me the story. “I gave no rest to that collector, who was a man of rare culture and wealth. For weeks and weeks I assailed him with my pleadings. The collector, knowing that he had a rare treasure, delighted in his ownership of the Heart Guarnerius and refused to give it up.

“At last, worn down by my importunings, he finally took the violin from its glass museum case, handed it to me, and said imperiously, 'Well, if you like it so much, play it!'

“I played as one condemned to death would have played to obtain his freedom! The collector listened in rapture. Deeply

moved, he said at last: 'I have no desire to keep it; it belongs to you. Go out into the world and take it with you and make it heard!"

That story reminds me of the harmony of the Good News we have been given. And for you and me to keep it to ourselves is a travesty. This is not a story for archives. Go out from this place and tell the story of the God of beauty, community and harmony who has personally given us a glimpse of another way of living.

So be it.