

## Midnight

If you go down to the beach around midnight - one of those edge-of-the-world beaches like Hatteras or St. George Island, where there's no gaudily lit-up strip or high rise hotels calling attention to themselves with spotlights - if you go down to the beach around midnight you can see heaven. Technically, what you see is the Milky Way, but as far as I'm concerned it is what actual heaven looks like. Heaven in the heavens, the sparkling glowing home of God and all the angels, luminous matter silently rotating among hundreds of billions of stars - a galaxy, our galaxy, 100,000 light years in diameter.

One year when my boys were small, we rented a house on such a beach during the time of the mid-summer Perseid meteor shower. After they went to bed after a long day of jumping in waves and digging in sand and collecting shells, I went outside to sit on the plastic porch chair, head thrown back and face upturned, trying not to blink, to watch for shooting stars. It was after midnight. One would occasionally zoom up and flash overhead as if traveling in the cosmic fast lane past all the other stars into heaven itself. But my favorite ones were the ones that seemed to be speeding down, toward the horizon, like an angel coming to make a heavenly announcement on earth.

It was like Christmas in July and I gasped in awe at the celestial show that somehow I felt a part of as I sat in the deep dark and deep silence, because it wasn't just up there, it was all around me, a silence punctuated only by the rhythmic lapping of a gentle surf, the very heartbeat of God. That which enveloped me was the same silence and dark and heartbeat permeating the whole universe. It was an otherworldly experience where there was nothing between me and the entire cosmos.

After midnight everything outside the city is so quiet that the stillness almost shimmers. It's easy to imagine that the heavens are serenely just floating around in silence up there, the same for ever and ever. But there's something in the makeup of our galaxy that causes it to create more new stars from celestial dust (the same as the dust that made us) all the time. Creation may be an almost magical phenomenon, but it's not soundless. The birth of a star creates a cosmic melody. But it takes a particular kind of listening to hear it - our human ears cannot pick up the galactic sounds because they are so very deep.

And so with the birth of a savior. It takes a particular kind of listening to perceive him at busy noisy Christmas. On our Christmas cards and in our pageants the baby is surrounded by both the

heartbeats and breath of sheep and cows and donkeys and oxen - the sounds of earthly life - but the heavenly sounds, the *gloria excelsis*, the angels' song our souls yearn to experience, must be heard with something other than our ears.

In other words, the world around us is noisy but salvation itself arrives in shimmering silence, slipping into our hearts with only the sigh that love makes, a sigh too deep for words.

Tonight, Christmas truly comes, the thinnest time and thinnest place of all, when heaven really comes to earth, when there is nothing between us and God. Christmas is not way up there, but it is right here, among us, all around us. The heavenly is bound up with the earthly, the divine with the human, the cosmic with the particular. And the one who is born the king of the universe and the savior of the world is also the Lord of our particular hearts where we have indeed made a manger for his birth.

Merry Christmas.