

**January 5, 2020**

Isaiah 60:1–11

John 1:1–20

*To See around the Corner*  
**The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding**

It was the last day of an old year, a few years ago now, and the late afternoon sky was grey with a promise of snow waiting to fly, something new to come, as I shut the car door behind me and walked along the line of cars already parked on the street to the front door of a certain house in a neighborhood on the other side of Boston. A new, clean sheet of time was freshly spread out before us, a new year of possibilities to imagine – and I had a set of Patriots jammies wrapped in penguin paper under my arm, my treasure to present at the epiphany of sorts that was already in progress inside the house. It was the last day of an old year, and I was late for a party, and the world too was late: late for an appointment with its destiny of peace and good will, late in awakening to the cries of the children on the wrong side of the tracks or the fence or the wall, late in rising to the meaning of the fires blocking out the light of the sun on the other side of the globe. “Late in time, behold him come,” goes the verse of the carol. Late in time, I took the front steps two at a time, jammies in hand, to greet a new baby who’d come not a moment too soon, with winter swelling and ready to break over all our heads.

The sight that was waiting for me in that house in a neighborhood of Boston changed the way I see Christmas.

There were perhaps forty people packed into that modest urban living room – all members of our little city church – filling every chair, sitting on every surface and thickly carpeting the floor. In the first moments of adjusting my eyes to indoor light, it was the stillness of all these people that struck me – the more remarkable as I noticed in the second instant that at the core of this human carpet there was a knot of children. Knees, arms, fingers intertwined, heads on laps, the hush of the room emanated from its very center where it was the children who held the silence – the children who are, though so often our center, so seldom our peace.

But it wasn’t until the third instant, as I added my parka to the mountain of coats in the front hall, that I noticed the most important thing of all about the room. In this particular house there is a stretch of wall that separates the front hall from the living room – so that, as you come in the front door and look left, there’s one corner of the living room that you can’t see from the entryway. And everyone in the living room was looking, together, toward that one corner of the room that I couldn’t see. So that the most important thing for me to see about the room was that I couldn’t see the most important thing. There being not a single spot of floor on which I could have even so much as planted a foot to make my way into the living room, I handed my penguin package down to someone, and watched it pass wordlessly, almost without breaking anyone’s attention, toward the unseen apex of this thick tapestry of woven lives where, as I could hear, presents were being unwrapped.

Of course, I knew before I ever stepped into that house what there would be to see there. I knew even as I marveled at how the sight of it had hushed and entwined so many lives that it was Tom and Karen sitting around the corner, just home from Latin America with their long-awaited, newly adopted son Daniel on their laps, introducing him to his family of faith. Daniel from the south, angel of a strange, drooling sort, to be our bridge from an old time to a new time, to be our youngest lamb, to take up his post at the doorway where years touch end to end.

But there, in that hallway, it dawned on me what I was really seeing: this was a pageant of the nativity.

You would have recognized the characters from pageants you have known. There were small angels, cherubim and seraphim of various ages, their wings folded into invisible mode, with half-eaten cookies lying limply in their hands as they bore their witness with saucer eyes. There were shepherds, without bathrobe costumes or crooks, looking suspiciously like the parents among us: Tim, Marsha, Sarah, Newell, Lucy – with the weary joy of parenthood etched in a post-Christmas way on their faces as they watched and relived all over again the wonder and the terror of a child newly arrived. And there were even Josephs, men and women too whose courageous choices to build different kinds of families made them parents to no children, parents to all children: Holly and Anita, Doug and Steve. And all of them magi, wise women and men too, who'd learned enough of struggle and responsibility in their lives to keep a hopeful eye on the stars and a wary eye on the powers and principalities of this world. Each of them having in some way heard the promise – “Arise, shine, your light has come, for the glory of the Lord has been revealed (again), and all flesh shall see it together” – all of them having followed tidings of great joy to this ordinary living room, “late in time, behold him come,” to look with delight – no, not just delight but with reverence – all looking with reverence at something around the corner that I couldn't see.

So there at the corner where two years met was the Dorchester nativity, the day Daniel was born unto us from the struggle and fear in a place far away to the south – born in the shadow of the tyrant poverty with all the world being taxed by one empire or another. And there, at the cusp of ends and beginnings was the kernel of meaning that gives the Bethlehem story its life: the birth of the holy child enables us to see around the corner.

We can't see the holy child with our own eyes; the angles of all the intervening history are too many and too sharp. But we see the people who see it. We see the people who look at the people who look at the people ... all the way down the trick-mirrored corridor of generations to the place around the corner of time where something happened once that changed us all. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the story says – and though we can't see around the corner to make eye contact with it, we see the Light it bears reflected from face to face down the facets of the generations, and hear the unwrapping of the gift in all the grace and truth they reflect. And so we behold its glory.

And is the world really redeemed because a baby was born once upon a time into poverty at the edge of nowhere? As desperately as the world needs to find its way out of the messes we've made, what the world nevertheless chooses to replenish its hope with is, of all things, babies. What a curious strategy, halfway between funny and sad, to put these little bald creatures up against secretaries of defense, bonus-saturated CEOs, climate crisis deniers. And yet – signs and portents of hope to come are indeed being born all around us even now: little pudgy faces with fathomless eyes eloquent as ever the eyes of Jesus could have been, each a facet waiting to reflect the light of grace, each a story in which you can listen again for the truth. The baby who was born once in Royal David's City, the child sitting among the teachers in the Temple and asking questions, the young man whose eyes are sad, whose hands are those of the poor, as poor he was born, whose gaze meets yours down through the generations – this Jesus whose face you'll never see, and never forget either, calls on you to keep faith with the future. The baby who looks at you from the lap of the Madonna, any Madonna, brings you face to face with the future. And the face cries that the redemption of the world is unfinished. He came to

his own, and his own did not receive him; but to all who did, he gave the power to become children of God, to sit together on the floor of history with lives entwined in the reflected light, and to behold. There is joy in the birth, but still suffering in the world, and redemption is begun, but not finished.

A friend of mine will be having a baby this spring. In her Christmas letter this year she wonders out loud how to understand her willingness to take that risk. She writes,

*“I’ve had several conversations, honest and hard ones, about why we’re bringing a tiny, brown human earth-side into a world that feels so apocalyptic. My honest answer is that my gratitude in action for the resilience of this child’s ancestors means that it’s not time yet for me to decide that this decade is where their story ends. I am relentlessly, indomitably hopeful that another world is possible, and I’m determined that we can make it so.”*

And she leans on some encouragement in an essay by Ricardo Levins Morales:

*“No one knows how to raise a child but we do it anyway. We don’t get it right. The essential thing is that we don’t give up and walk away. Don’t get me wrong. It is important to learn and improve and become wise in the ways of struggle – or of parenting. But that comes with time. It comes after the idea of not being in the struggle no longer seems like an option.”*

Christmas pulls our vision around the corner – because otherwise, all the singing, the giving, the traditions, don’t amount to much more than simply an exercise in nostalgia, a project of historic preservation. The particular genius of Christmas is that Jesus enables us, by looking back, to see ahead: to see around the other corner of history, to the place where history is headed, the place where another world is possible. Is it sacrilegious to suggest that where history might be headed is a place not unlike a living room in Dorchester, where lions and lambs and children and parents all lie down together, and couples of all kinds and colors fall in love with the delicate, holy mystery of life, and nations play with nothing more dangerous than Legos on the floor?

Not often, I admit, are we granted such visions. But now and then you’ll walk out of a tired old year into someone’s living room, say, and find yourself, for an instant, at the heart of the universe, gasping before nothing so ordinary as the advent of another baby perched on the leading edge of new time, with nothing more joyous than the baby’s sounds in your ears, nothing more compelling in your heart than the baby’s call to you to help Jesus make a world safe enough for there to be a future in. Nothing more glorious in your heart than Jesus’s call to help the baby grow up in a world that is relentlessly, indomitably hopeful.

Unto us this Child is born. Late in time, behold him come.

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