

Over the desk in the Parish House where I occasionally sit and write these days, I've hung a rough black and white woodcut made by Dr. Mary Marshall Taylor in 1987. It depicts, in the foreground, a hillock covered with trees. In the middle ground is a swath of broad horizontal, rippling lines that sometimes seem to me to be the ocean and sometimes I see more as a range of low hills moving away toward the horizon. Above that horizon sits a large orb so perfectly round that it looks as though it might have been made with a biscuit cutter or an upturned wine glass or perhaps by an old-fashioned pencil compass. Surrounding it are narrow black bands rippling out from the orb, each demarcating a wide circle of white. The surround of bands and the circles are uneven, wave-like, and they seem almost to glow. Staring into the picture always feels like I am staring into the glowing heart of the cosmos, into God's heart, which is what I think Mary meant for me to see when she made it for me.

Mary and I worked together in the late 1980's in a little parish mission chapel in Gray's Ferry called Holy Communion. She came to me, I think, as a seminarian from the Lutheran seminary that's our neighbor just down Germantown Avenue where she was studying as part of her late-life call into the Priesthood. She'd left a brilliant career in the sciences as part of that call, and arrived to work with me in our neighborhood there at 27th and

Wharton Streets, where the crack epidemic had arrived a few years earlier, scorching through the streets surrounding the Chapel, ravaging families with its daily deadly violences, and terrifying all of us who lived there. Somehow, Mary was not afraid.

She plunged into church-based, faith-based community organizing against the plague of violence that had us hunkered down in fear, summoned many of the women, Black and white, who had called those blocks home for generations out of their fear and onto the streets in solidarity and a straight-forward fierce resistance to the destruction that was afflicting us.

When I asked her what fueled her resistance, she told me that it was her faith in the Incarnate God, in the Word made human, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, brain and heart of our brain and heart. She said also that it was in the profound complexities of her career as a biological scientist that her incarnational faith had been born and was supported. The cosmos, in her faith, teemed with Incarnational testimony. I think she once told me that when she looked into a microscope, she sometimes felt that she was looking directly into God's beating heart and into God's purest light. It was that heart and that light, she said, that propelled her into the homes of our Holy Communion neighbors and onto our streets, shattered

more and more by violence. If she did not tell me exactly that--1987 was a long time ago--she told me the gist of that, and she acted out that Incarnational faith over and over again as we worked together down there in Gray's Ferry 35 years ago.

Isaiah tells us tonight that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great Light...on them light has shined." It's almost blinding in its promise, that Light. It shines into the darkest parts of our humanity, into our mortal afflicted humanity, promising peace and righteousness for all humankind. It's the sheer audacity of the Light and Love of God that shines on us tonight.

But unlike staring into the sun, which will almost certainly blind our human eyes, when we gaze into the light of God, we see a family, just a regular, benighted, weary human family, a family like the millions of others hunkering down on our planet's strained surface tonight, often hungry, often without a roof to shelter under, often on the run from unimaginable danger and violence, often under the sentence of terrible illness or affliction, often wrapped in the grief of painful loss. In this family, a very pregnant young woman has just gone into labor after a long, hard journey. Her only shelter is a barn, or some think, a cave. Her partner, not yet her husband perhaps, hovers, anxious. Into this family, soon, a child will be birthed, out

of the birth pangs and, we may imagine, the screams of the frightened young mother. Together, they will clean the mess of birthing off the squalling baby as best they can, and in our story, wrap the baby in whatever cloth they have in which to swaddle him. Then, after the baby eats his first meal in this new world, they will lay him to rest and sleep in a manger where not long before animals have been eating. It's their musty warmth that heats the barn or cave. Soon, bidden by a mysterious but irresistible angelic summons, shepherds appear with their charges, the baa-ing sheep to see this thing that God has made known to them: Mary and Joseph and the child, lying in a manger.

This, when we gaze into the heart and light of God, is what we see. In this Incarnation, in this poor tiny creaturely baby, the grace of God has appeared. And it is glorious! It is joy! It is the purest kind of rejoicing! It is fuel for our passions for holy justice, for filling the hungry with good things, for sitting in tears with those who mourn, for holding close those whose struggles are too great to bear alone.

Soon after Dr. Mary Marshall Taylor gave me the woodcut that hangs above the desk where I work these days, she told me that she had been living for some time with Parkinson's Disease, that the tremors I had noticed were not just the shaking of an aging body but symptoms of

something much much worse. Her brain had ceased being her reliable informant, she said, and the Parkinson's was worsening rapidly. She was not sure how much time she had in which to be herself, for this particular brand of disease brought with it some dementia. She asked me to pray with her, and as she prayed, she lamented her illness, but thanked God that in it, she was seeing more and more clearly into the heart of the Incarnation, more and more into the Light of God.

That night, or maybe a night or two later, she led me and others from the neighborhood, out onto shell-shocked Wharton Street, and we marched, carrying signs and lights and torches, for blocks and blocks, God Incarnate, the Love and Light of a very a very human baby crying out for a little peace, a little love, a little harmony in our world. And as we marched, we sang, something like this:

“Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere;
God, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born!”

Amen and Amen.