

Seeing in a Holy New Light

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Grace to you and peace this holy night in the name of Jesus Christ.

On a crisp December night not so long ago, my husband and I went to the planetarium at our local high school to see the program they had put together about the Christmas Star.

We were part of a very small crowd. First thing, I spotted a young couple and their little baby. I'm very suspicious of little babies at the movies and so forth, and this one did look like a potential troublemaker.

And there was an older man there who turned out to have worked on a recent renovation of the planetarium. He was so proud of the job that the volunteers had done, and he had a right to be. The facility looked state of the art. And he also turned out to be the grandfather of the little baby and proud of her, too. As far as I was concerned, the jury was out on the baby.

We chatted while the clock moved on a little past the hour when we were supposed to get started. If I get somewhere on time, which is kind of rare, I am like a reformed smoker — very haughty about anybody who is late. Plus the baby situation is tenuous; she's googooing now, but we all know how quickly googooing can turn on you. We look at the director with that sort of smiling, questioning look that you try first when somebody isn't doing what they are supposed to be doing. And he says, "I'm waiting just a minute. I would hate for somebody to come in in the middle."

The baby situation is definitely ominous. She's cranking up a little whine. And then, lo and behold, in the door slouch maybe ten teenage boys. At least ten. With the baggy pants and the tennis shoes bigger than Rhode Island and T-shirts with ornery slogans on them. I'm thinking, oh great. A reform school class outing. Okay, maybe a scout troop, but I don't think so.

The boys sit down, way down, sliding low into the seats, spreading out all over the planetarium, which, as you know, is in the round. We are literally surrounded. Two or three are very near us looking sullen, as if this Christmas star thing sure wasn't their idea, as if they were dragged there, which they probably were. The baby is taking it all in and deciding whether to really holler or just keep us in suspense until a more opportune time.

There we are — fifteen people and a baby — and I'm thinking, this is definitely not looking promising. Scruffy kids, a nice older man, seemed a wise kind of guy but after all a stranger, and the young couple all wrapped up in their baby. And the baby, of course, who is totally unpredictable. This is not the crowd I would pick to catch the Christmas spirit with. Not by a long shot.

Then the lights begin to dim and dim all the way to pitch black dark. And for a moment there, in that deep velvet dark, it is as if you are totally alone. Nobody else in the world — you can see nobody — not the dear one next to you nor the sullen kid four seats over, much less the strangers scattered all around the room, all around the four points of the compass. And for a moment you dwell in a land of deep darkness,

in a round, dark world all alone. And as it stretches on — the time of darkness — it closes in on me and I am strangely afraid.

And then slowly, slowly, slowly above and all around the stars begin to glimmer. And the planets begin to glow just barely red or yellow or green, just a glow. And very distant suns beam — the hottest ones are blue like burning ice. And my word, the heavens envelop us, moving in some kind of stately circle dance all over and around us. And truly the stars reveal God's glory. And the faces — somehow transformed — all around our little world are turning toward the light. Even the sullen boy four seats over, his head thrown back in wonder, a small smile flickering. And the little baby goes "ooooohhhh." For all of us.

The show was great. Good science. Good history. Very interesting. But the moment came for me in seeing our little motley crew afresh, lost in joy and wonder. There was another motley crew so long, long ago. A very unlikely crowd, not at all whom you'd pick to catch the Christmas spirit with. Smelly shepherds and baffled wise men and a first time father scared out of his wits and a young woman just done with birthing and worn out, exhausted, hurting. And, of course, the baby. Who, as you know, turned out to be a real troublemaker, who does, in truth, turn the world upside down. Who turns these words inside out — Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Come to us as a little child. For them so long ago. And for us. So that through him, any old motley crew can start out — even in the dark — and end up seeing — ourselves, each other — seeing in a holy new light. Through the eyes of that little baby, any old motley crew can see that we are beloved beyond the telling. In the light of the gaze of God. Who comes to us again, this dark and starless night.

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the Everlasting Light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.