
GANZ - ADVENT MEDITATION, FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT 2024



Thomas Cole (1801-1848)¹, *The Angel Appearing to the Shepherds* (1833-1834)², displayed in the Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia.

¹ *Grove Art* (Oxford Academic Online) at “**Landscape Painting**” - In the USA painters of the Hudson River school, founded by **Thomas Cole**, responded to the sublimities of Turner and the melodramatic outpourings of his follower John Martin. These artists believed that landscape should declare the glory of God and saw in the solitary wildernesses and virgin forests of North America a world that retained a primeval innocence. ... In the mid-19th century, the Hudson River school’s interest in light was developed by the Luminists, a group founded by Fitz Hugh Lane and developed by Martin Johnson Heade and Sanford Robinson Gifford. Yet Luminist works are characterized, not by grandeur and melodrama, but by an extraordinary stillness and clarity, and by smooth, glistening surfaces that create a sense of infinite space.

² If you wish to zoom in on this painting, so that you can look closely into each section of the painting, go [here](#):

Freeman Dyson (1923-2020): “You sit quietly gestating them [scientific theories], for nine months or whatever the required time may be, and then one day they are out on their own, not belonging to you anymore but to the whole community of scientists. Whatever it is that you produce, a baby, a book, or a theory, it is a piece of the magic of creation. You are producing something that you do not fully understand.”³

In Matthew’s Gospel there are no Angels associated with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but only an Angel who came to Joseph at Jesus’ conception, or soon after that. Matthew offers us not a “heavenly host” in the sky over Bethlehem and the Stable, but instead he speaks of Wise Men coming from the East, who can see better in the dark that which finally mattered most to them to find. I think of the dramatic opening line of Theodore Roethke’s poem: “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.”⁴

O Star of Wonder, Star of Night,
Star with Royal Beauty bright,
Westward leading,
Still proceeding,
Guide us to Thy perfect Light.⁵

Neither the Gospel of Mark nor of John speak of Mary and Joseph, of Bethlehem or of Shepherds or of Angels or concerning a census of the whole world to be taken.

It is in Luke’s Gospel alone that we find described an Angel directly associated with the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary of Nazareth. He also describes a “whole host”

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Angel_Appearing_to_the_Shepherds_\(Thomas_Cole\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Angel_Appearing_to_the_Shepherds_(Thomas_Cole).jpg).

³ *Britannica - Freeman Dyson* (born December 15, 1923, Crowthorne, Berkshire, England – died February 28, 2020, near Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.) was a British-born American physicist and educator best known for his speculative work on extraterrestrial civilizations.

⁴ Theodore Roethke, “In a Dark Time” at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43347/in-a-dark-time>. At the Poetry Foundation’s biography of Roethke: “Poet and writer James Dickey once named Roethke the greatest of all American poets: ‘I don’t see anyone else that has the kind of deep, gut vitality that Roethke’s got. Whitman was a great poet, but he’s no competition for Roethke.’ His difficult childhood, his bouts with bipolar disorder, and his ceaseless search for truth through his poetry writing led to a difficult life, but also helped to produce a remarkable body of work that would influence future generations of American poets to pursue the mysteries of one’s inner self.”

⁵ **John Henry Hopkins, Jr.** composed this carol (1857), “The Quest of the Magi” or “We Three Kings” for a Christmas pageant in New York City. Wikipedia notes that this carol was the first one written in America that became widely popular. For example, Sir Stephen Cleobury, The Choir of King’s College Cambridge, *100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols* (2018). I mention this recording, because it has the well-known and beautiful descant.

of Angels appearing on Earth and pouring forth from Heaven as either pure Light or pure Music – it was impossible to distinguish the two that night. “Was it something that we saw, or was it something that we heard that most affected us, that left us paralyzed with awe and feeling so small, too small for the size of the Gift?”

Luke 2 (NJB): ⁸ In the countryside close by there were shepherds out in the fields keeping guard over their sheep during the watches of the night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord stood over them and the glory of the Lord shone round them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid. Look, I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people.’⁶

And then, ¹³ And all at once with the angel there was a great throng of the hosts of heaven, praising God. ⁷

Christ by highest Heav'n ador'd,
Christ the everlasting Lord;
Late in Time behold him come,
Offspring of the Virgin's Womb.

Veil'd in Flesh the Godhead see,
Hail th' incarnate Deity!
Pleas'd as Man with Men t'appear,
Jesus our⁸ Emmanuel *here*.⁹

Those Angels were singer-songwriters of exceptional capacity! We are in debt to the Shepherds who took notes that night. Perhaps it took all of them to remember not only what the one Angel said but also the stanzas of the hymn that the “whole host” sang so gloriously and with a perfectly composed descant.¹⁰ Being playful here, but honestly, there is a story we do not know from Scripture about how carefully the Shepherds described to Mary and Joseph what they saw and what they heard. We guess that it was

⁶ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 2:8-10.

⁷ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 2:13.

⁸ Don't miss that “our”. It refers as much to us human beings as it does to the Angels.

⁹ A hymn/Christmas carol composed for Christmas Day in 1739 by Charles Wesley (1707-1788).

¹⁰ For example, Sir Stephen Cleobury, The Choir of King's College Cambridge, *100 Years of Nine Lessons and Carols* (2018).

through those new parents and what they recalled of the Shepherds' testimony that we came into knowledge of that night out there in the hills above Bethlehem.

Luke 2 (NJB): ¹⁷ When they saw the child they repeated what they had been told about him, ¹⁸ and everyone who heard it was astonished at what the shepherds said to them.¹¹

But of all that the Shepherds narrated, does it not seem likely that what most captivated the attention of Mary and Joseph was what they told them about the Angels? Surely, they sought more details about them – “Tell us, again please, about the Angels. What were they like? What struck you first about them? The one who spoke to you, what did his or her voice sound like? Did each have his or her own expressive face? What happened inside of you in their presence? Did any of them give you his or her name? Do they look like us?”

Why is it that *we* never ask about the Angels? Why?

There is an early tradition appearing in the first great Teachers of our Christian faith – the Fathers of the Church¹² is what we call them – that the reason God became human was not *primarily* “to save *us* from our sins” but to come to the assistance of the good Angels!

Jean Danielou, SJ,¹³ *The Angels and Their Mission: According to the Fathers of the Church (1952), Chapter 3* – “The Fathers of the Church present the ages that preceded Christ as marking an increase in the power of the demons. The vestiges of a monotheistic revelation, communicated to all men through the ministry of the angels, grow faint with the flourishing of idolatry and devil worship. Even in the one part of the world that God reserved for Himself, the people of Israel, the rising tide of sin continues to mount. The angels to whom the nations were entrusted are powerless to stem the flood of evil. ... But in the midst of this desperate situation, the Word of God becomes incarnate, *in order to come to the aid*

¹¹ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 2:17-18.

¹² **Britannica - Church Father**, any of the great bishops and other eminent Christian teachers of the early Christian centuries whose writings remained as a court of appeal for their successors, especially in reference to controverted points of faith or practice.

¹³ **Fr. Jean Danielou, SJ (1905-1974)**, created a Cardinal by Pope Paul VI on 28 April 1969. Wikipedia: Jean-Guenolé-Marie Daniélou S.J. (14 May 1905 – 20 May 1974) was a French Jesuit and cardinal, an internationally well-known patrologist, theologian and historian and a member of the Académie française.

of His angels. ... That is why the angels in charge of the nations [of the world] welcomed the coming of the Savior with great happiness."

Why is it that *we* never ask about the Angels? We should. Have you over the years recognized how we human beings have a remarkable capacity to make everything about *us* - "He came to die for my sins," etc. - showing little taste for imagining that there is a lot more going on in the Trinity's work, and through the Incarnate Son, than just *us*?

Let us conclude by taking a close look at our painting.

First, greater than *what* the painter has painted, in its particular details, is the combined impact on us of the painting as a whole. Each time I look *at* it ... no, each time I see *into* it, I feel awe; I feel its capacity to activate in me *the true silence*, the kind meant by the carol "Silent Night". The presence of the holy Mystery¹⁴ is so strongly shining everywhere in this frame, that I am convinced that the very rocks were able to feel something, something good, something that gave them a dignity completely unrecognized by us human beings who, unless one is a Geologist, consider them "just rocks." As one poet put it, that night was "a shining night":

Sure on this shining night
Of star made shadows round,
Kindness must watch for me
This side the ground.
The late year lies down the north.
All is healed, all is health.
High summer holds the earth.
Hearts all whole.
Sure on this shining night I weep for wonder wand'ring far
alone
Of shadows on the stars.¹⁵

Second, the little sheep dog that you see there *might* be on alert at the coming of the one Angel (before the rest of them poured forth into the world's sky). But I am not convinced that he or she is. Rather I think that faithful dog is fully into his work, watching over the flocks by night, as his or her human has trained him or her to do. For

¹⁴ Finally, we all have a favorite "name" for God. The noun "God" simple leaves too much out. For Fr. Karl Rahner, SJ, whose spirituality over a lifetime of scholarship and prayer has been described as a "Winter" spirituality, called God "the Holy Mystery."

¹⁵ From a book by James Agee, *Permit Me Voyage* (1934). See: <https://allpoetry.com/Sure-On-This-Shining-Night>

the dog to do this work, and so full of joy at the doing of it, is completely in accord with its nature, a reason why God made such magnificent friends of men (dogs) and helpers in his or her works. And because that dog is in such complete accord with itself, with its job, with its human family, and with its flock, it is not at all disturbed by the coming of an Angel. Dogs know whom to trust, whom to fear. *The dog is not afraid here; the humans are:*

Luke 2 (KJV): ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: *and they were sore afraid.*¹⁶

If that noble dog were frightened, then the sheep also would have been disturbed and made restless, ready to bolt. But both dog and flocks are a picture of serenity. The human beings however, oh complicated creatures that we are and so often out of order, are the ones who are reacting strongly to the approach of the Angel – “sore afraid”.

Third, it is breathtaking what the painter has done with the famous star, shining in the West to men in the East wise enough to notice it ... and to understand its invitation. Notice how the light of it shines in the darkness, and the darkness helpless, with no capacity to overcome it, to stop it, and especially failing to keep it from *pointing* to the Stable, where lies the little one wrapped in swaddling clothes, who is “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God.”

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.¹⁷

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: King James Version](#), Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), Lk 2:9.

¹⁷ From the first of the four quartets by T.S. Eliot. *Wikipedia*: “**Burnt Norton** is the first poem of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. He created it while working on his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, and it was first published in his *Collected Poems 1909–1935* (1936). The poem's title refers to the manor house Eliot visited with Emily Hale in the Cotswolds. The manor's garden serves as an important image within the poem. Structurally, the poem is based on Eliot's *The Waste Land*, with passages of the poem related to those excised from *Murder in the Cathedral*.”

But don't miss how already the Light of the World shone. Do you see that strong beam of light proceeding from inside the Stable, bathing a considerable area of land out in front with the glory to be revealed?

¹⁴ The Word became flesh,
he lived among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth. ¹⁸

Happy fourth week of Advent everyone, and in the fullness of Time, merry Christmas.

¹⁸ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Jn 1:14.