

The crèche of our lives

2001

I take issue with those who contend that Christmas is a religious holiday merely decked out in secular disguise. They would have Christmas confined within religious stocks. But I would suggest quite the contrary: Christmas may be our most secular holiday.

I say this not because the feast of Christmas was spawned from the Christians' competition for the ancient Roman audience. This is not about the hangovers from winter solstices or the cult of the Unconquered Sun. Nor am I worried about how commercialized the Christmas season has become in the hectic confidence game of today's feverish economy.

What I have in mind is subtler and more dangerous. I'm talking about stories being told in human terms.

Despite the frantic confirmations of the *National Inquirer*, we know that the birth stories of Jesus were not matters of historical record. They are confabulations of later communities. The myths that had sustained our religious flights have fallen like aging satellites. They have burned up in the atmosphere of reason and science.

Yet we can still detect in our cultural debris remarkable tell-tale signs. No longer are we captivated by gargantuan, heavenly armies, but we are moved by more modest lines, refugees from the grand and the grotesque, human beings groping for words and staggering from the wreckage of the cosmic Bastille. Life's meaning now toddles forward on two feet.

This is the time to recognize that humanity is coming out around the world. But we already know this. Our most endearing memories are the ones that have been reverently etched not in the heavens, nor on thrones, nor even in boardrooms, but in the fragility and finitude that mark the crèche of our lives.

If trees could talk ...

2001

By now most Christmas trees have been mulched, or dispatched in garbage trucks. Each year our house resists that automatic sloughing of the season. I am greatly to blame for this. While my wife worries about the fire hazard of a burning bush, I've been feeding the tree sugars and water to keep it green for the arrival of the three kings.

Actually it is the time after Christmas which means so much to me. After the glare and rush, after the gifts exchanged, the dinners cooked and eaten, after the phone calls, I treasure those moments when I simply stand or sit by the Christmas tree.

Many years ago a dear friend told me of the Lithuanian belief that at this time of year the trees would talk. Ever since I was a young child standing in awe of the shimmering tree, I thought it was so. Yet every year the tree stands mute.

In the corner of our living room space and time intersect. Memories run along the limbs, ornaments and angels, fragments of our lives elsewhere, gather and glimmer as the lights begin to bubble.

Then something deeper than sentiment is felt. An insistent sadness dissolves those incandescent memories. Is this not just a futile torch against the inevitable gloom?

Or is there more? A chance to learn how trees speak? Not in words, but in the silence, so touching, so palpably alive, not left behind on a Kentucky hillside, but invading, spreading, reaching out, right here in our living room ...

O silent tree, holy tree.

Reading the Christmas skies

2001

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. No, I don't mean that unexpected snowstorm last week, which lingered longer than usual this time of year. Nor do I mean those unremitting waves of consumer frenzy, pulsating throughout the malls.

Call me nostalgic, but this Christmas season brings back haunting visions of the past. But not Dickens' romantic sprite. This is not a matter of leaping soot-covered roofs or stirring long lost bowls of wassail.

No, it's about looking up. About learning to read the heavens.

For some time I have been quite distressed sensing that things are running rapidly out of control. For a moment the Texas wildcatters are being forced to bide their time. Meanwhile military buildups continue at an uninterrupted pace. Virtual war games prep our sons and daughters for the clone of Desert Storm.

At home we are distracted by our Yuletide bonuses that now are gift wrapped in pink slips. Heads have rolled in the White

House over the economy. A presidential sleight of hand delivers only a snow job as the plutocrats prepare to make a bundle on our insecurities.

As I said, it's about learning to look up. A dear friend many years ago shared a poem he wrote soon after World War I. Amos Wilder, ambulance driver and winner of the Croix de Guerre, pastor and scholar, taught me not only to recognize when I was in a situation beyond my control but also to try to name the beast. He spoke of "march[ing] out on haunted battle-ground," for he had seen "daemons fighting in the sky/ And battle in aerial mirage." He realized that the troops in the trenches were "the shadows of celestial foes" and that the battle was a "mimicry of heaven's."

Whether from a desert bunker or the littered stock market floor, from a frozen cornfield of Iowa or the monotonous shopping mall, from an overcrowded drop-in center or a silent hospice room, this is the season to regain the habit of looking up.

It is time to name the forces that are distracting us from living human lives. These are not the usual gang of suspects, not the sensational news at eleven, the fifteen-second sound bite of agony.

It is time to look into the night sky and feel the chill of fear, to realize how much we've polluted the air, launching our desires into the atmosphere to keep from feeling the dread that nothing is out there. It is time to recognize that the music of the spheres is not static from the cosmos but the immature scratching from our political boom boxes.

'Tis the season to scan the skies like Londoners in the Blitz, to catch hints and glimmers of something more than night. I suspect that this is what the gospel writer had in mind when he invented an army of angels breaking out in song for a bunch of nobodies.

Shall we gather at the river?

2005

On Labor Day Cincinnati will gather at the river.

We've been doing this since 1977. It started as a ten-year anniversary party for WEBN, whose owner, Frank Wood, wanted to rock away the summer. The Rozzi family have aided and abetted with their fireworks, producing one spectacular after another.