

I attended seminary at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. Small world - DB Murray also attended Sewanee! DB is from Nashville, you know.

Sometimes, Sewanee is called, little Oxford, for its gothic limestone buildings and charming village-feel. At the center of campus, you find All Saints Chapel – which is anything but a chapel. All Saints is a cathedral-like structure with a ceiling twice this high, and stained glass windows I'm sure are thirty-feet high.

Sewanee is also called the Mountain, even though it is not actually on a mountain. It is located at the edge of the Cumberland Plateau, so to get there, you have to drive 2500 feet up the side of the plateau. The air is clear, On the Mountain, and at night, the stars shine brightly.

You touch eternity, at night on the Mountain, universe. God is there, and the prophet's words ring true: God is invisible, Dwelling in darkness. You are staring into the face of God.

We lived in a white clapboard house at the end of a dark street. Tilly had not yet been born. Tate, now sixteen, was just two. During the Winter of 1997, the Hale-Bopp comet flew near our solar system, and Tate, Laura and I would go outside at night, in front of the White House, standing in the crisp winter air, and watch the comet seem to streak across the western sky.

I say “seem” because even though comets are streaking, you can't actually see them move. They hang in the sky, painted into the twilight, they appear static, but their tail tells the truth – they are hurtling through space.

Hydrogen and nitrogen ignite with fire and violence. Hale-Bopp was both extraordinarily peaceful, and extraordinarily violent.

Just like all of space.

Space appears peaceful, but it is a black canvas of paroxysms, atoms collide with atoms, causing chain reactions and explosions outward ... and explosions inward, too, black holes suck-in extant matter, galaxies fly apart like the gears of a sprung clock.

Winter may be placid, on the Sewanee Mountain, but Hale-Bopp was not placid; it violently resisted the avaricious pull of the sun's gravity.

And that is where God is hidden, behind the comet, invisible, dwelling in darkness –

Space is not the peaceful, Hallmark God of sentimental emotions and goose bumps. And yet, it is that God – for the One God is full of audacious power and might;

God ushers in Winter with harsh blizzards, and Spring with savage thunderstorms. And there is an awesome violence to God – Don't tell my colleagues I said so – they might defrock me.

The heavens are proof. Space is a violent place. There is so much we do not know about God. We do not understand such extraordinary power, but what we do understand even in chaos and violence is this: God is first and always good, and of love.

Christmas is similar in character to God. We assume Christmas to be the Hallmark season of sentimentality. We listen to elevator-music in malls and on radios. Peace on earth, they sing, but there is no peace. Christmas brings no real peace. They say it does, but it doesn't.

Nation still lifts sword against nation, brother still wages war against brother. The lion and lamb are yet to lie down together. People in this very room have experienced violence, even this past year.

Someone died, a spouse, or parent, or child – and your soul has been left violently alone.

And I have to ask, Could it be – that the invisible God, the one who dwells in deep darkness – finds a home there, in your darkness? Maybe your darkness is the stable; maybe your darkness is the manger, a place for extraordinary miracles and new birth – but it is so dark, isn't it?

The darkness sets the stage for birth. Life is birthed in space.

John the Baptist has turned melancholic at the end of his life. Maybe I made a mistake, he asks himself. Maybe Jesus is not the One.

So he sends an emissary to ask Jesus, Are you the One?

Jesus doesn't answer John, but points at what he has done. Jesus points to the violence he has accomplished.

It is true.

Jesus has executed violence on blindness, on deafness, on hunger and inability. Jesus has executed violence on marginal lives that before now seemed lost, but have come alive. He has raised the dead, fed the hungry, straightened the crooked paths.

Holy violence – and Jesus says this to his disciples: The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent are taking it by force.

No, you can't find these words in today's reading. The scholars don't like them – they don't make sense. It is as though Jesus is praising violence –

The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

The heavens that declare the glory of God, are the same peaceful heavens extant with violence. Holy, creative violence. Peace at Christmas, but so many lives at Christmas are discomfited, shaken to the core.

Sentimental sappy feelings are not what Christmas is about. Perversely, Christmas is about violence. It is about things being born – gods and people and hopes and dreams.

And birth is violent. The contractions and pain, the pushing and pulling, the baby practically drowns in amniotic fluid, until the shock of light pushes against his chest and forces him to pull in air.

When he does, some black hole in the heavens opens, the fabric is torn, and God enters this dimension in human form, the baby in a manger –

The violence of God means this: God will not tolerate injustice. God will not tolerate hate. God will not tolerate prejudice and cruelty and war and evil. There is judgment on these things.

And what does that mean for you, as you look forward to Christmas, the birth?

Rosalind Brown writes this about God in our lives: We tend to measure God's presence in any situation by our sense of well-being, and fail to recognize that disturbance in our lives is often a sign of God's activity.

Anthony de Mello would call it the Sting of the Almighty. He tells this story: A saint was once given the gift of speaking the language of ants. The saint asked one of the ants, What is the Almighty like? Is he like an ant?

To which the ant replied, Oh, no! We ants, you see, have only one sting, but the Almighty, he has two!

The violence of God arranges itself on behalf of those who would do good, who would be good – and judges the evil.

God is on your side.

But it is dark, space dark, and you cannot see God – who is invisible, and dwells in darkness.

But that is why Isaiah, the prophet, has agitated, Look! Your salvation is at hand. Look!