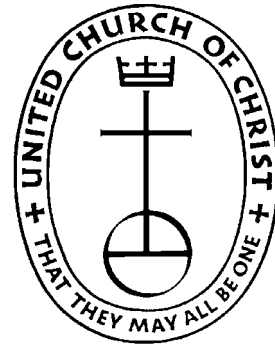


For the Time Being

A Sermon By —
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December 27, 2009



We see Christmas as the culmination of a holiday season, but really it is the beginning of a new way of understanding the world, each other, and ourselves. Where do we go from here? We go out, each one of us, to carry God's gift into that difficult, challenging, frustrating, and wonderful world for whom the gift has been given.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

For the Time Being
Romans 6:1
December 27, 2009

Merry Christmastide! That's where we are now, in the Christian calendar. These twelve days after Christmas, between now and the Day of Epiphany, is the season of Christmastide. In much of the world, and through much of Christian history, Christmastide has been the time for Christmas celebrations, and gift-giving actually happens on January 6, Epiphany, the day that is traditionally celebrated as the day that the Magi found Jesus and gave him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Not so much here in contemporary America. We celebrate the season of Christmas pretty much from Thanksgiving to December 25, and as soon as that day passes, Christmas is behind us. How many discarded Christmas trees have you already seen lying in alleys or on the curbside? Suddenly what seemed happy and bright is looking old and dried out. Last week's Christmas present is now just one more of our many Christmases past, and we know that it is a long 363 days between now and when we get to hear angels sing once again. It's okay to talk about watching and waiting during Advent – we know that Christmas is coming. All that is coming now is more cold weather.

In 1941 and '42, poet W.H. Auden wrote a long poem entitled "For the Time Being." Subtitled "A Christmas Oratorio," the poem speaks directly to this time after Christmas, when the decorations need to be put away and the house feels suddenly more empty than it did just a few days ago. It is a series of dramatic monologues, spoken by the characters in the Christmas story – Mary and Joseph, the angel Gabriel, shepherds, wise men and Herod – and by choruses and a narrator.

Set simultaneously in first-century Palestine and in the western world of the twentieth century, Auden's poem and his use of the familiar characters paint a picture of the very ordinariness of our lives and the task that lies ahead of us in simply getting through the days. Sometimes with wry humor, sometimes with pathos, sometimes with the simplest yet most elegant phrase, Auden gives us hints about how the miracle of incarnation can redeem our living, even the dead of winter.

The poem finds Joseph disillusioned and angry when he learns that Mary is pregnant. The wise men are lost in their individual pursuits of truth and love and meaning when they set out in their journey, following a star that they hope will lead them to their true senses. Shepherds, simple laborers, uneducated, outcast, the disposable and invisible members of society, for once get the attention and the promise

of life that they deserve. Simeon, the devout observer, who has spent his life waiting, waiting, waiting for a sign that God's presence is real, finds peace when he recognizes God's love in human flesh.

The final stanza of the poem, in the voice of the narrator, sums up all of what has happened, both in the Christmas story and in our contemporary experience of it, and makes this observation:

Well, so that is that.
Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully -
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be

Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment
We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;
Remembering the stable where for once in our lives
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.
And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause,
We look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit
Our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose
Would be some great suffering. So, once we have met the Son,
We are tempted ever after to pray to the Father;
“Lead us into temptation and evil for our sake.”
They will come, all right, don’t worry; probably in a form
That we do not expect, and certainly with a force
More dreadful than we can imagine. In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:
When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
That God’s Will will be done,
That, in spite of her prayers,
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.ⁱ

For the time being – that’s the challenge of post-Christmas reality. Living with purpose when we’re exhausted. Acting with generosity when we feel all used up inside. Delighting in the moment when the burdens of yesterday and the anxiety of tomorrow sap our spirits and weaken our souls. We’ve forgotten already that the miracle of Christmas isn’t only for December 25th. We need to be reminded in our post-holiday lull that the miracle is that God’s love is incarnated in human flesh – and that flesh is our flesh, and that love dwells inside of us.

Episcopal priest Robert Hansel has written a meditation called “Christmas Beginnings.” He writes that “the holiday season has become for lots of people more of an obstacle than a celebration—something to be endured and survived. By now most of us have had about all we can take of crowded stores, syrupy electronic Christmas music, and interminable traffic tie-ups. We’re tired and frazzled by all of the chores that we had to get done, presents that had to be purchased and wrapped, and the mind-numbing logistics of travel plans and party schedules.” Lots of folks tell him, in all

candor, that they are glad when it's all over, so they can pack up the ornaments and life can get back to its normal routine.

The problem with that attitude, Hansel writes, is that it reveals exactly how mistaken we are about the nature of Christmas. Properly understood, Christmas is not just a day or even a season of the year—an event on the calendar that arrives and passes. No, Christmas is much more than that. It is a permanent change that enters into our world “for keeps,” affecting every one of our attitudes, actions, and relationships for the rest of our lives.

Howard Thurman, in a collection called “The Mood of Christmas,” puts it this way:

When the angels' song is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

- To find the lost
- To heal the broken
- To feed the hungry
- To release the prisoner
- To rebuild the nations
- To bring peace among the brothers
- To make music in the heart.

Christmas is, you see, not an END of anything. It is the beginning of a whole new way of understanding the world, each other, and ourselves. Christmas is the arrival date for a gift that must be opened up and put to use if it is to make any difference at all.

It all STARTS right now. Christmas is God's way of presenting God's self to us, in person, offering to enter into our hearts to STAY. The Incarnation is, literally, “the enfleshment”—God's compassionate Spirit is born within each of us, yearning to find daily expression in actions of Thanks-living.

Where do we go from here? We go out, each one of us, to carry God's gift into that difficult, challenging, frustrating, and wonderful world for whom the gift has been given. You and I are the delivery system. What a gloriously beautiful plan. ⁱⁱ

I got an email this week from one of our church members. This member has been caring for a family member who is sick, and wrote this to me:

“I would like to share my emergency room experience at Long Beach Memorial. I arrived at the hospital and was trying to find my way to the emergency room and the first person I saw when I came into the lobby was Ronda Holman from church. She was very kind and took the time to help me find my way to the ER. When I got to the emergency room, the very first person I saw was Cynde Soto, who despite her own issues, was very sweet and gracious. I am not a big believer in signs and miracles, but I do believe God somehow arranged this. Though life has prevented me from being as active at First Church as I would like right now, I do feel the connection and appreciate the prayers and support.”

That’s incarnation. That’s God’s love in human flesh. And while that may seem a small and almost insignificant, what a difference the loving and compassionate presence of two people made that day in the ER.

What a difference we can make in the simplest gestures. What a precious gift we give when we simply present to one another, recognizing that God’s love is in each of us, and flows between us. How different our world can be when we live with the realization that God’s incarnation is not a one-time event, but is the ongoing gift, challenge and responsibility of each of us. Living in that fullness of life, living with an awareness of God’s presence in and with us, living with gracious good-will toward all people – that is how the time being is redeemed.

The work of Christmas is to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among all people, to make music in the heart. That may be a tall order, but we can bring that reality into the world, one day at a time, one person at a time, one selfless moment at a time,

At the beginning of Auden’s poem, he cites a single verse from the book of Romans, written by the Apostle Paul. Romans 6:1 reads: *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid.*

I would paraphrase that verse: What shall we say then? Shall we continue in our old, broken patterns, knowing that God’s light has come? God forbid.

Shall we continue being hopeless and helpless, knowing that God’s love dwells inside each of us? Heaven forbid.

Shall we continue stuck in remorse, or mired in self-absorption, or caught up in our warring ways, when we know that lending a hand to a friend in need, or sharing our tears with someone who is grieving, or opening our hearts to a child of God who doesn't know how loved they are, when we know that doing so will change the world? God forbid.

In these sometimes quiet, sometimes dark, sometimes lonely days after Christmas, for the time being, may each of us experience the fullness of God's love, and may each of us find the grace and courage to share that love with everyone we meet. Amen.

ⁱ "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" by W.H. Auden, published in 1945

ⁱⁱ "Christmas Beginnings" by Robert Hansel, from explorefaith.org