

## **For the Time Being**

Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND

Matthew 2:1-23

January 8, 2012

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During this past Advent,  
the sermons on John the Baptist, Joseph, and Mary  
were shaped by the chorus of W.H. Auden's great poem,  
"For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio."

Today, the end of the poem  
shapes this sermon on Epiphany,  
on the coming of the magi – those wise sages,  
from their places of prestige and respect  
to a simple stable and a working-class family  
because they followed a star.

The poem was written in the early 1940s  
and it is still considered  
to be one of the most powerful and evocative  
Christmas poems of the last 100 years.

New York Times writer Peter Steinfels describes it this way:  
Auden's Christmas is one "that can glimpse redemption  
in the trivialization of Christmas  
in the frantic shopping,  
distracted gaiety and unsuccessful attempts,  
as he says,  
to love all of our relatives.

This is a Christmas for the day[s] after Christmas.  
This is a Christmas for grown-ups."

Auden reminds us, Steinfels says,  
of "the sacredness of the mundane."  
Or, to put it another way,  
the holiness of the here and now.

Auden's magi  
have come to the limits of their analytical reasoning,  
and, now, instead they are willing to follow revelation and a star.  
By doing this,  
they are teaching us something of wisdom –  
something Jesus' disciples and all good scientists know:  
that truth is far, far more than facts and figures  
in God's amazing world . . .

Auden's Herod is not a raging tyrant . . .  
instead "he is the dutiful public manager,  
the skeptical apostle of rationality and progress."

When the Magi show up,  
Herod becomes afraid that  
    “reason will be replaced by revelation  
    and justice by pity.  
Society will honor ‘hermits, bums, and permanent invalids’  
    instead of generals, philosophers, and statesmen.’  
Herod cannot handle a world  
    where human beings are not in charge!

In his poem,  
    Auden suggests that every day—  
    even the ones in the rest of the week  
    the “leftover days”—  
    should be holy.

He writes:

    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  
    Leftovers 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.

Then Auden reminds us,  
    that this year, like every year,  
    the moment of incarnation comes  
    and we still do not understand  
    what this really means for our daily lives  
    here and now;  
    we are already moving ahead  
    focused on what comes next:

He writes:

    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.

It seems the height of foolishness to be,

like the magi,  
led far from our plans and habits  
by revelation  
or a star.

It seems the height of foolishness to see the world  
as full of wonder every day  
as it does on Christmas Eve and Day.

So our world,  
instead of being enlarged with wonder  
by the presence of Christ with us,  
shrivels again.

Auden writes:

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.

The world becomes not only Christ-less, and God-less,  
but dehumanized as well –  
because to be fully human  
is to be “filled with God,”  
which is to be “en-theos” or enthusiastic!

Auden knew this all too well.

He was writing in de-humanizing times  
just before the full outbreak of WWII.  
Things had already gone so far,  
that some people were labeling others as “It”  
instead of calling them “You” or “Thou”  
which honors their being made  
in the image and likeness of God.

This is how well-educated, thoughtful Germans  
were led, step by step,  
to participate in something  
as horrific and destructive as the Holocaust.

This is how anyone  
is able to harm another:  
We deny their Godliness  
and turn them into objects,  
into “It.”

Auden writes:

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.

Being conscious,  
being truly present,  
takes self-reflection  
and it takes effort on our part  
to get out of our worn ruts  
and habitual ways of seeing and being in the world.

Auden writes:

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.

Seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary,  
the holiness in the everyday –  
allowing our eyes to see the wonder –  
becomes just one more task to do;  
so we stop seeing  
and settle for shades of gray and silence.

Auden writes:

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.

Christmas,

the moment of Incarnation,  
begs us to break the silence –  
to stop living  
in terms of profit and loss  
and effectiveness and efficiency  
physically or spiritually,  
and to stop  
evaluating ourselves and our neighbors  
by those same devaluating criteria.

Incarnation begs us to start living  
attuned to the grace and wonder  
in the smallest and unlikeliest moments  
of this time in which we live,  
here and now,

Incarnation begs us to remember  
that the world –  
and everything and everyone in it –  
is full of the glory of God  
all during the time being.

Inarnation is not meant to be boxed up  
and put away  
with the tinsel and ornaments.

Incarnation is meant to be celebrated  
and followed with wonder  
into likely and unlikely places  
every single day.

And this is the greatest gift of the magi.  
Amen.

### **Sources:**

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“W.H. Auden,” *The Poetry Foundation*, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/w-h-auden>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For\\_the\\_Time\\_Being](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_the_Time_Being)

### **Texts:**

Matthew 2:1-23

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have

come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

from: For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio  
By W.H. Auden

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