

“For the Time Being”  
Christmas Eve, 2007  
Luke 2:1-21

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If the celebration of this night were simply an event, then it’s charm will certainly be extinguished with the last candle. Then we would have to manage our feelings to coincide with the uplift we hope of any inspiring event.

But this birth, like any birth really, has lasting implications for our lives ever after. That may not be apparent tonight. We may have to wait for it. We may not discover the significance of Christmas until later this winter when, as the poet wrote it, we “dismantle the tree/putting all the decorations back into their cardboard boxes.” This night will start to make sense only when we have sent the children back to school, and the sights and sounds of this night have become only a “fading memory.” As in any birth in any family, it may only dawn on us what has happened when we are back into the daily commute, and when “the streets/are much narrower than we remembered.”<sup>1</sup>

Only . . . late winter. . . allows access to the deeper layers of meaning [of Christmas] . . . because Christmas is more than simply a discrete peak event – a holiday. . . It is an annual reminder that God has acted and is acting ‘to redeem from insignificance’ the monotonous sludge of our everyday routines. . . . Christmas has more to do with the serious confrontation with emptiness in late winter than with holiday good cheer in December.<sup>2</sup>

Because it is a real birth we celebrate tonight, we had best remember Jesus’ birth came into the lives of real, mostly ordinary, people. It did not happen amid candlelight and carols. Joseph and Mary needed a place to stay, a fairly banal concern. You wouldn’t call it a religious matter, would you? Shepherds were just struggling out in the hills hoping to keep sheep safe and well for just one more night. Their hopes didn’t extend beyond hoping this night would not be as dirty and cold as last night.

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<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House), p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> William F. French, “Auden’s Moral Comedy: A Late-Winter Reading,” *Christian Century*, February 24, 1982, p. 205 available at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org). French’s reading of Auden’s poem has provided the theology of this sermon. Cf. “For the Time Being:”

*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.*

Now fast-forward many nights to this one. The same, quite ordinary things are happening to the same sort of people. People are looking for a place to stay tonight, some more desperate than others. And there are folks putting in yet another night shift driving ambulances, working on the line, selling soft drinks and donuts, delivering papers. There are those who have quarreled again with their family, some who slog through the familiar territory of grief. And some struggle tonight for nothing so sublime as a first down in a football game.

To this and other ordinary circumstances of life, the angels in the Luke story announce that God has decided to join us deeply in this life. This announcement comes as every bit as jarring as it did to Mary, Joseph, and some scruffy shepherds. For doesn't it seem an odd and unexpected gift that God is more interested in inhabiting and redeeming ordinary lives from insignificance. Popular myth would have it that God should be about more truly sublime adventures, appearing in the smoke of a temple, tabernacle, or church. The angels do not announce that God is to be found in soaring thoughts, lyrical musings, lofty sentiments and inspiring moods. But no. Here he is in ordinary bread, ordinary wine as a gift for you. No, this is a celebration of flesh, and in that it bears the hazard and burden of that flesh. It means, dear sisters and brothers, that God has not given up on the world. Imagine that.

When you and I look around and notice what else is in this hand basket with us, we might be excused from giving up on that world from time to time. We live in jeopardy of random violence, predatory diseases, broken relationships, moral stumblings, ruthless politics, and crushing poverty. Settling for just one night of candles and enchantment to ennoble and inspire us is at least something we could actually reach.

Surely you would have some sympathy for God if God concluded the same thing about our world. Exhausted, it would be understandable if God would have resigned his position, turned his back on the world in disgust, and walked away. You could understand if God didn't have the stomach for continuing.

But God didn't. Not only does not God give up on us, but God this night joins us here, in those ordinary lives. Wherever that finds you and me tonight. That is the good news of Christmas.

While you and I may seek escape from our troubles in this world, God decides this night to join them. And in joining us in the flesh God takes all the risk of the messiness, imperfections, and limitations of this world.

There never has been a "pure" Christmas in the sense that Mary was draped in blue, Jesus in clean swaddling cloths, and Joseph standing attentively near as the animals look on adoringly. You and I do our best to create such a Christmas out of our tinsel, bows, and packages. The hazard is that we may leave the "flesh" out of Christmas. We are sure that no God would come into this mess of a world.

Martin Luther, reflecting on Christmas, noted how often God shows up, but not where you and I have been looking. We had sought God in the heavens, and instead God is born in an occasionally annoying, crying baby. We had thought our redemption would look more like escape from all this, and instead he joins us here. We were all looking in the wrong

direction. “. . . The birth of the Christ Child reveals, among many other things, that [our Christmas] idealism is thin-lipped and ultimately trivial.”<sup>3</sup>

Christmas has nothing to do with the drama of the perfect family or the chastity of reproduction. Instead, Christmas is a holy narrative about the collective pain of our mortality, our shared sufferings and joys, and finally about one who embraces that very same flawed world.

What holds our world together is not the narrative of the rich, the powerful, the pure or the perfect. It is not nearly so tidy as that. Tonight, in the birth of Jesus, you and I are called to relinquish the tidy and recognize God in the messiness, liveliness, and trauma of the real story of creation.<sup>4</sup> If that isn't apparent to you tonight, it shall surely be when you take down the Christmas tree, get the kids back to school, learn some more intransitive verbs, and take up the cold commute again.

Wherever tonight finds you: that is where God embraces you by taking on the flesh of Jesus, Immanuel, God with us. It is that good news we announce, celebrate, and hope in this night. Like the surprised shepherds and Jesus' parents, all Israel, welcomed this embrace. May you with all the appropriate humility that flesh implies rejoice that tonight God finds you here. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> The last three paragraphs are indebted to Ann Milliken Pederson, “Christmas and the Reality of the Incarnation: *Finitum capax infiniti*,” *Word and World*, Volume 27, Number 4 (Fall, 2007), 382, 3.