



SERMONS THAT WORK

1 Christmas

Back in the Box

[RCL] Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 147 or 147:13-21, Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7, John 1:1-18

The poet W.H. Auden captured the after-Christmas feeling very well. Toward the close of his long poem, “For the Time Being,” he wrote:

“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.”

Auden’s “For the Time Being” is a Christmas oratorio written for the bleak mid-winter, post-Christmas malaise. The excitement of the holiday is past, and now we get back to our daily lives, made all the more dull by the brief holiday.

“For the Time Being” was written on the heels of Auden’s conversion to Christianity. The lengthy poem gives Auden’s understanding Christianity, particularly the meaning of the Incarnation – God becoming human in Jesus. Auden wrote:

“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.”

Auden wrote this oratorio in England in 1941 and 1942 and published it in 1944. He, like other Christians of the time, desperately wanted the brief glimpse of the Christ child to sustain the world in a time of war. The world was full of people naming other humans “it.” That’s how you get well-educated, thoughtful Germans to participate in the horror of the Holocaust. You rename another person as an “it” instead of a “you.” You dehumanize the other person. You certainly don’t try to see Christ in them. That the temptation to demonize the enemy existed on both sides of the conflict did not escape the poet. He concluded:

“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.”

In lives full of work, keeping bills paid, writing papers or memorizing multiplication tables for school, it would seem impossible to redeem everyday time from insignificance. Yet, that is just what scripture tells us is the Good News of Jesus’ birth. The Good News is that all time is redeemable. Nothing has to be insignificant.

The Gospel of John begins with a cosmic view of time. John tells of the Incarnation from a heavenly perspective, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

The prologue to this fourth gospel introduces Jesus as the preexistent Word of God, the second person of the Trinity. John does not begin his gospel with Jesus’ birth, but with the creation, telling that not one thing is, that Jesus did not create. This ties Jesus very closely to the everyday stuff of life. Before he was born to a poor couple in a lowly stable, Jesus had worked to create dirt, water, air and all life.

These words from the start of John’s gospel are most likely the words of an ancient hymn, perhaps written by the John the Apostle, perhaps known in the community where he led the church. The hymn itself is

verses 1 through 5, 10, 11, 14 and 16. A closer look at those verses shows that each verse contains a keyword picked up in the next verse. To introduce us to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, John weaves together a tightly written hymn of praise of Jesus as the eternal word of God, with John the Baptist's affirmation that this eternal word has come among us as the light of the world.

John wrote: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

John carefully and beautifully shows us how the two great ages – our time-bound world and eternity – coexist in the person of Jesus. By weaving the story of the eternal Word with the story of that Word being made flesh, we see that those two ages are not mutually exclusive. In the person Jesus, we can meet eternity in the here and now.

Through Jesus' life, his words, his actions, we see the will of God lived out in the flesh. John's prologue tries to stand at the crossover point between this age and the next. For John that nexus is the manger, when the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us. God did not send Jesus to redeem merely a stable in Bethlehem, or even all of first-century Palestine, but to redeem all creation.

Let us lay these two visions of life alongside each other – Auden's vision of a Christmas celebration now morphing into a mid-winter malaise, and John's vision of the light of Christ spreading into the darkest corners of our lives.

Do you entertain Jesus as merely an agreeable diversion? Or are you ready for something more? John wanted us to let the Word of God that created all that is pitch his tent in our day-to-day existence. I'll warn you: This is risky business. It will always be far easier to confine Jesus to holidays and perhaps Sunday mornings. It will always be far more difficult to invite the light of Christ into every area of your life.

Are you ready for the light of Christ to shine in your darkness? What about the parts of you that you hope no one notices? What about the parts you like to keep tucked under the bed or in the back of the closet, so to speak? Are you ready for the light of Christ to shine there, too?

The celebration is over. As Auden writes, "Now we must dismantle the tree, putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes." But the light of Christ was not meant to be tucked back in the attic with the decorations. The love of God as it shines through Jesus was meant to take root in your soul. And it still can, if you make room in your everyday life for light to shine in your darkness.

*This sermon was written by **the Rt. Rev. Frank S. Logue** for 1 Christmas in 2014, when he served as canon to the ordinary of the Diocese of Georgia.*