

## *THE TIME BEING*

Matthew 2.13-15

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Angels.

If you were in Adult Learning during Advent, you know that the Christmas stories of Luke and Matthew are very different. They have different geographies. They feature different characters – Luke focuses mostly on the women of the story; Matthew on Joseph. Luke has lowly shepherds and Matthew has regal Magi – those stunning astrologer magicians from the East.

But one of the things they have in common is angels. And angels in both Matthew and Luke have a pretty consistent message – (1) don't be afraid; (2) this is what could happen; (3) and this is what you should do.

So it is no surprise that Matthew's story includes this visit from an angel.

### **Lesson: Matthew 2.13-15**

Now after they [the Magi] 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 fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The "don't be afraid" part happens earlier in the story. But the angel's message is that something is about to happen and there is something Joseph needs to do – get out; flee; become a refugee in Egypt.

After all the lovely heavenly language about the promise of Emmanuel – God-with-us - and the star in the sky and the gifts of those Wise Ones, the angel in Matthew comes crashing in with news that brings us quickly back to earth where political corruption and violence and forced immigration and fear are the order of the day.

Sound familiar?

Perhaps that part of the story is another kind of left-over – something to get back to *after* the holidays; something that's still there even when we are pleasantly and even necessarily distracted by messages of love and hope; back to the things we may have imagined would be magically made right by the Christmas spirit.

And yet, here we are.

As the poet Howard Thurman reminds us, when the song of the angels has stilled, the work of Christmas begins ... *again*. All over again, we face the work we may have put on hold during the holidays – the work to find the lost and heal the broken and free the prisoners and act for peace.

To be fair, some of that work has crossed over into the celebration of Christmas – feeding hungry folks; Christmas stockings for people living on the street; making connections with those who are lonely; actions for peace; and some churches displaying their Nativity scene in cages or surrounded by fences, putting the holy family squarely in their place as a story “ripped from the headlines.”

If the birth of Jesus is, on the one hand, to lift us up to see ourselves and the world more clearly, it is also, on the other hand, to remind us again of what is happening on the ground – what are lives are like in “the time being,” as W. H. Auden says.

*Now we must dismantle the tree, [he writes]  
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.*

For me, Auden exactly captures not only this time between Christmas and New Years and the “dismantling of the tree,” but the “time being” when we make this annual shift from celebrating something to re-engaging the life and the world we knew before the celebrating began.

And we have to ask ourselves again the hard question – the timely question – Did any of it make any difference?

Are we like those “innocent children” in Auden’s poem who “whispered so excitedly outside the locked door,” only to “grow up” when the door opens and we discover that the presents under the tree don’t really match the promise of what we thought would make us happy - and feeling not only disappointed about that, but also guilty?

I think, if there is any difference to be made in this “time being,” it is those last two lines of Auden’s poem:

*Remembering the stable where for once in our lives  
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.*

Those of you who know the work of the great Jewish theologian Martin Buber, will find this familiar. His famous work, “I and Thou,” or “I and You,” as his English translator has it, reminds us that all of life is relationship. Even trees are a “you” as an extension of God’s self in creation. And our spiritual work is to shift from I-It relationships to recognizing the “you” in everything.

Now, you would think that recognizing all life is relationship would be easier with people. But how easily people become “it” to us.

The problem we are having right now is that refugees and immigrants like Joseph and Mary have become the “it” of a “social issue,” not the “you” – people with whom I have a relationship.

People living on the streets are “the homeless,” not “you.”

People of other faith traditions – like those Magi of Matthew – are part of the “it” of other religious traditions, not “you.”

After all, it is easier to talk about poverty than to talk to poor people.

It is easier for some of us white folks to talk about people of color than to talk to them.

It is easier for us to settle into the “it” of our demographics of age and race and gender and sexual orientation, than to engage the “you” of someone different from us.

It is just easier, more convenient, less of a hassle for people to be some “it” rather than a “you” with whom I have a relationship.

What if, in this time being between Christmas and the New Year, we spend our time remembering that everything and everyone is a “you” and nothing and no one is an “it”?

The cashier at the grocery store is a “you.”

That challenging neighbor is a “you.”

That difficult family member is a “you.”

The person sitting next to you on the bus or driving in the next lane over is a “you.”

The people at work are “you.”

The person sitting next to you right now is a “you.”

Buber would say that the most holy way we can engage the world right now is to see the “you” in all people and in all things.

Matthew and Luke do not have the same stories in their telling of the birth of Jesus. What they do have in common are angels. Angels with a simple message really: (1) don't be afraid; (2) something is about to happen; (3) this is what you should do.

And I'm thinking this morning of the angels in Luke who show up to those terrified shepherds minding their own business, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

What do the angels say? "Don't be afraid, for unto *you* is born this day," a savior; and you should go find this child, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

And the shepherds go and find this child and, the story says, they go everywhere rejoicing.

The promise was not that something – some "it" had happened.

The promise was that "unto *you*" is born – in that stable where, for once in their lives, everything became a You and nothing was an It.

So today, if you hear that voice – the voice that says "unto *you* is born" this promise of new life – don't be afraid and, for God's sake, for your sake, for the world's sake, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

This selection is excerpted from Auden's long poem "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" (1942), which can be read in full in *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems* (Modern Library, 2007, Copyright by The Estate of W.H. Auden). Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translation by Walter Kaufmann (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).