

FOR THE TIME BEING

Luke 2.22-40

December 27, 2015, Sunday of Christmas Week

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

Luke 2:22-40

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

For the Time Being

Well, so that is that – that’s what W.H. Auden writes in his *Christmas Oratorio* –

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 of an appetite, having drunk such a lot,

Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully –

To love all 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 ...

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 ...

... 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.

“In the meantime ... the Time Being to redeem from insignificance.”

When I first stumbled on this poem, it was a kind of epiphany about that let-down feeling that hits me right about now.

When I was a kid, it was a kind of sadness. The significance of all the days leading up to Christmas was ... Christmas Day. So what was the significance of the days that followed Christmas? It was over. In the shadow of Christmas the days were insignificant and all that was left was the bleak midwinter – the Christmas lights began to disappear; the music changed; those feel-good stories about people caring about other people began to fade. It was like all the air had been let out of the balloon.

It turns out that Auden wrote his poem in the dark days of WWII. It was a time when the significance of any day was up for grabs. And that was especially true as the world limped toward Christmas and then had to deal with the aftermath of whatever little bit of joy they could eke out of the holiday slipping away. Auden knew what was at stake in those days that followed Christmas Day. It was the Time Being that needed to be redeemed.

In my adult years, the days after Christmas have been a let-down of another kind. It is less sadness and more relief. Once we get passed Christmas Day, things seem to slow down a little. The pressure is off.

I think I used to make such a big deal about there being 12 days of Christmas not because I didn't want to let it go but because it was in that time between Christmas and New Years that I finally experienced some of that calm and quiet I was longing for.

It was in those in-between days, in other words, that I had a chance to experience the significance of this season.

And Auden is right, I think, to frame all this in terms of significance. Is this season trying to convince us that our days have meaning only because of their proximity to Christmas – there are, by the way, only 363 shopping days until Christmas 2016 -- or is Christmas a window into the significance of every day?

That's the question we face on a day like today.

**In the meantime – Auden writes --
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair ...
... the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance**

It occurred to me that the Christian community has, for most of its history, understood its life as “in the meantime” – we are living somewhere in between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus. You could probably map a church's theology based on the significance a particular group of Christians place on either of those ends.

If they are first coming Christians, they may tend toward a vision of God that is *tender* – God coming among us as a baby, present with us in our human struggle, alive in our human experience of life and death.

If they are second coming Christians, they may tend toward a vision of God that is *triumphant* – God crashing into the world, delivering justice, sorting out inequities, and generally making things right whether humans like it or not.

There are, of course, extreme examples at both ends of the spectrum.

But, either way, Christians have historically agreed that we are in-between somewhere. We are living “in the meantime.”

And what we do with that “meantime” makes all the difference.

This isn't true just for Christianity. You probably have been at a memorial service when someone has read that Linda Ellis poem, “The Dash,” about that important line on a gravestone between the date of birth and date of someone's death. It's the dash between those two significant dates that make all the difference.

*For it matters not – Linda Ellis writes -- how much we own,
the cars ... the house ... the cash.*

*What matters is how we live and love
and how we spend our dash.*

Maybe it's a little too cute. But it's also very true.

Part of the reason I never like to leave Anna and Simeon out of the Christmas story near the end of Luke 2 is because it points to the significance of this in-between time. The angels and the shepherds are gone now. A couple is simply going about the business of living their lives and doing the things that parents do for their children. They go up to the Temple to dedicate their 8-day old baby and two old prophets, at the end of their lives, see in this little one the signs of hope they have been longing for.

That baby somehow confirms the significance of their ‘dash’ and all those in-between days they spent looking for light in the world and redemption for the people.

And the parents and the baby are in their own “meantime.” They return to Galilee, to their own hometown of Nazareth, where their world begins to take on its new normal. And “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and favor.”

We might not know what all Jesus learned in that “meantime” but we do know that he returns to Nazareth as a young man and stands up in his hometown synagogue and he asks for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads, “The Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor and freedom to captives; to give sight for the blind and to tell you that this year is the year of God’s liberation.”

And, in the meantime, Jesus seems to be saying, with bills to be paid and machines to keep in repair and our everyday lives to live, there is the time being to redeem from insignificance.

Maybe one of the gifts of these days between Christmas and the New Year is that it gives us the opportunity to think about what it is we are doing with our own meantime.

Because, the truth is as the great Howard Thurman says, it’s ...

*When the song of the angels 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 flocks,
[It’s then that] the work of Christmas begins.*

And today, if you hear *that* music, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

W.H. Auden *For the Time Being (Christmas Oratorio, III)*. Linda Ellis, “The Dash,” see www.linda-ellis.com.
Howard Thurman, “When the Song of the Angels is Stilled,” from *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations* (Friends United Press, 2001 edition). The music for the anthem using Thurman’s poem is by Elizabeth Alexander. Thurman (1900-1981) was a renowned educator and pastor, the first African-American Dean of the Chapel at Boston University and the co-founder of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, the first integrated, interfaith, multicultural church in the U.S.