

Church of the Holy Cross
December 23, 2012
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For the Time Being

“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” Our Gospel lesson today starts at an in-between time in Luke’s narrative, at some point after the Annunciation but not yet at the start of the Nativity story. Mary has experienced a visitation from the angel Gabriel and has found herself pregnant, as he foretold. And then....what? We aren’t told of any more angelic visitations. So here she is, waiting. Is she frightened? Bored? Ill? Skeptical? Is her faith in the angel’s message starting to waver? Luke doesn’t tell us why Mary undertakes a journey to the hill country to see her kinswoman Elizabeth, only that she goes with haste. Luke’s sketchy account surely leaves out the difficulties of the trip: heat, dust, riding a donkey along rocky tracks in the hills. Mary couldn’t have traveled alone; she’d have needed a male family member to escort her. And yet she goes.

Did Mary make that trip regularly? Were she and Elizabeth close friends? Perhaps she just wanted to see her kinswoman, said to be miraculously pregnant. Perhaps she was concerned about Elizabeth’s health, given a pregnancy in old age. Maybe she was beginning to wonder and wanted to see if that part of the angel’s message had come true. In any case, we hear this wonderful encounter between the young woman and her older relative, when Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb at the sound of Mary’s voice. There is an echo of Mary’s question to Gabriel (“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”) in Elizabeth’s greeting: “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to see me?”

In response, Mary suddenly brings forth an evocative poem of praise and expectation, the wonderful song of faith that we heard in today’s Canticle, dispelling any sense we may have that she doubts God’s promises to her and to her people. Her words harken back to the ancient prophets, echoing their calls for social justice. And they presage Jesus’ call for the coming of God’s kingdom, a revolutionary vision of justice and mercy, love and peace.

Just as suddenly, Luke ends this little tale with a return to Mary’s mundane, in-between time, telling us she stayed with Elizabeth for three months before returning home.

We, too, are in an in-between time. As we do at the start of every church year, we hear the story of the Annunciation, then wait (patiently or impatiently) for the fulfillment of the promise with the birth of Jesus at Christmas. But, more fundamentally, we live our entire lives in an in-between time. All of modern history has been in this in-between time, as Christians look back at the Crucifixion and Resurrection and ahead (patiently or impatiently) for Christ’s return and the coming of God’s kingdom.

The poet W. H. Auden called this in-between time “the time being.” In his long poem titled “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio,” written over the course of several months during the early part of World War II, he couples the Advent and Christmas narratives with allusions to the hardships and atrocities of his time: “There are quite a number of homes without roofs, and men

lying about in the countryside neither drunk nor asleep...all sailings have been cancelled until further notice...it's unwise now to say much in letters." And he writes of the difficulty of living on earth in the time being, the time between the First and Second Comings: "To those who have seen the Child, however dimly, however incredulously, the Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all."

And for ourselves? What do we find in our "time being?"

For the time being, the North Korean regime starves its own people, and the Syrian Government prepares chemical weapons to use against its own citizens.

For the time being, African warlords enslave young boys as soldiers, and thousands upon thousands die of preventable diseases.

For the time being, Muslims and Christians assault each other across the globe, and the Holy Land is torn by conflict.

For the time being, some Americans go hungry, and others are unemployed, and our culture urges us to spend and buy and consume.

For the time being, a man driven by motives we cannot begin to fathom murders little children in their classrooms, and a father wounds his 2-year-old daughter as he guns down her mother on the steps of a Metrobus.

What do we do in the face of such tragedy, such pain and suffering? Some people cut themselves off and take care of Number One. Some blame God and turn away in bitterness. Some feel despair and lose hope for a better future. Some see this as the only world we have and work to improve it. Some leave it all in God's hands and make no effort. But what do WE do? What is the proper Christian response to our "for-the-time-being" world?

We remember that "faith without works is dead." We remember that we are God's hands on earth. There is no contradiction in both looking forward to the Kingdom and working to make it real "for the time being." We do not betray our faith in God's promise when we work toward making this world closer to the Kingdom. It may even be that God's plan makes our works on this earth necessary for the coming of the new earth.

So, for the time being, we cook for our homeless neighbors and visit the old and the sick at Iliff.

For the time being, we support our youth mission to the needy in Dungannon and send parish members to Africa to build schools and hospitals.

For the time being, we vote for leaders we trust and lobby for social causes we believe in.

For the time being, we put aside our differences—political, ethnic, religious—and recall our common heritage as children of God.

For the time being, we call one another brothers and sisters in Christ, we offer the peace to each other in church, ensuring that we really mean those words.

For the time being—and for all time to come—we pray. We echo the Old Testament prophets in their call for justice. We join Mary in her poem of praise and hope and faith. We obey Christ's commandments, to love the Lord and to love our neighbors. We do all these things for the time being. Because, right now, the time being is the only time we have.