

“I’ll Go”

Years ago I filed a cartoon from the South Bend Tribune editorial page. A little girl bemoans the fact that her birthday is on Christmas. She says, "When your birthday's on Christmas, everyone's too busy with toys, gifts, and merrymaking to remember it..." Jesus sands behind her and says, "Tell me about it..."

Christmas birthdays are bummers, unless your family found creative ways to celebrate your birthday apart from the Holy day. Birthdays close to Christmas are almost as bad. Just ask our kids. Lisa was born five days before Christmas. John was born three days after. They wish there could have been more separation between Jesus' birthday and their own. But the truth be told, their December birthdays were harder on me than on them. Ask my checking account.

Another Christmas is history. Once again we are in the throws of the after Christmas phenomenon. The great "lead up" has given way to the "let down" of settling back into normalcy. In the church calendar, today is the first Sunday after Christmas. It is the beginning of the Feast of Christmas - the first of the twelve days of Christmas as we celebrate the significance of Jesus' birth.

My guess is that when you read the bulletin heading, you keyed on the word after, as in, "After the ball is over..." After the discarded wrapping paper is stuffed into trash bags, after the dinner dishes are cleared, after you say good-bye to Uncle Buck, and by evening the radio stations have returned to regular programming, its adjustment time.

I came across a poem by W.H. Auden that keenly describes the mood. It is called, "The Time Being":

Well, so that is that.
Now we must dismantle the tree, putting the decorations
back into their cardboard boxes -
Some have gotten broken - carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and mistletoe must be taken down and burnt.
And the children had gotten 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 our relatives, and in general grossly
overestimated our powers.

As in previous years, we have seen the actual Vision and
failed,
To do more than entertain it as agreeable
Possibly, 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 that Lent and Good Friday
cannot 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
depressing as this.

**To those who have seen the child however Dimply,
however incredulously
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.**

I'm not sure if there is an antidote to feelings associated with the "after-side" of Christmas. I suppose a general lesson to be learned is that anticipation of the event is often better than the event itself. But we are better equipped to deal with it as people of faith when we remember that Christmas is not a day, a season, or an observance. Christmas celebrated an unimaginable visitation. God's spirit clothed itself with flesh and blood and bone and laughter and tears and pleasure and pain and unconditional love. God came out of hiding and entered human history as a baby.

The letter to the Hebrews is not an easy read. It is basically one long, carefully crafted argument about the superiority of Christ over Judaism. Jesus is called the great high priest and the pioneer of our faith. The great wonder is not that God came to us, but how he came. Nestled in our text is an amazing verse. For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham.

Angels played a big role in the Christmas story. They were busy going back and forth carrying messages from God to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. They formed a choir sweetly singing o'er the plain. But the heavenly minions weren't needy - not like the descendants of Abraham. If there is any confusion about where you fit into the picture, I will clear it up - you are not angels. You belong to Abraham's clan - the people God blessed a long time ago. You and your cousins keep falling in and out of love with God. You have good intensions, but along the way you've found an infinite number of ways to "blow it."

None of our Christmas hymns say anything about needy angels. We're the ones who can't walk the straight and narrow. We're the ones who keep falling on our daces. WE'RE the ones who need help.

Let me borrow an example that's close to home. As you know, Dave and Karen Eis are nice people. They are God-fearing folks who are always looking to do the right thing. They don't speak a negative word about anyone. Come to think of it, though, there was that time they called someone a... and I recall another incident when... Dave and Karen are also very intelligent people. They both have Master's Degrees. And what did they do with their gifts, and education, and credentials? Karen could have done well in private practice. Dave could have gotten a government job in social services, or he could have made a comfortable living as a pastor. They could have done these things, but instead they worked for the Salvation Army, serving the needs of the poor and homeless. There was a need, and they said, "We'll go."

Jesus came to the aid of people like you and me - the children of Father Abraham who have mucked up this world in unangelic ways. I imagined a conference called by God for all the heavenly hosts to decide an appropriate course of action in response to the problems on earth. Previous plans were scrapped because of humanity's rebelliousness. Murder and mayhem were rampant. After much discussion, God concluded that the only way to restore humanity to the purpose for which he created it was to get personal - very personal. "The only way to change them is to live with them," God said. "I need a volunteer." Gabriel looked at Michael, and Michael looked at Raphael, and Raphael looked at Gabriel, and there was silence. Finally Michael spoke up, "You're not getting me to go down there! It's too dangerous." "Me neither," said Raphael. Then God said, "All right... then I'll go."

To keep Christmas alive within you and not have it eroded by the "after Christmas blues" requires knowing your direction. We didn't build an escalator capable of getting us up to heaven. But God built a descending one to us. Henry Van Dyke came close to this truth in a legendary poem called, "Keeping Christmas." He said:

*"Are you willing to forget what you have done for others
and to remember what others have done for you to ignore*

what the world owes you and to think what you owe the world, to stoop down and consider the needs of little children... If so, then you can keep Christmas. And if you keep it for a day, why not always?"

One of the greatest religious films that wasn't billed as such is *Places in the Heart*. Depending on your outlook on life, the end is either puzzling or it makes perfect sense. People are gathered for worship in a little country church. The attendance is sparse. The pastor is reading from 1 Corinthians 13... "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but have not love, I am nothing..." As he reads, Wayne and Margaret Lomax, who were recently estranged because of his infidelity, begin to hold hands. Communion is being passed amongst the congregation. Wayne and Margaret receive the sacrament. All's well that ends well.

But as the elements are passed, the congregation grows more numerous. They come from out of nowhere, including people who have been villains in the story. The trays are passed to the pew where earlier only Edna Spalding, her two children, and her blind border, Mr. Will sat. Now, next to Mr. Will at the end of the pew sits Moze, an African-American who helped Edna prevent foreclosure on her farm by bringing in a crop of cotton. This is very strange. In an earlier scene he had said good-bye to Edna, and fled town under threat from the Klan. Even if this had not happened, it was unthinkable that a black person would be accepted in a white church in Waxahatchie, Texas, in 1935, let alone be a welcome communicant.

Moze receives communion and hands it to Mr. Will, who in turn gives it to Edna's children, Possum and Frank. Edna takes it and passes it to her husband Royce. But hold on a minute. Royce was murdered five minutes into the movie, shot in the line of duty as sheriff by Wylie, a drunken African-American boy. How did Royce get in the church? Royce says, "The peace of God," and passes it to the person next to him who happens to be his slayer! Wylie takes it and says to Royce, "the peace of God." The screen then fades into black as the movie ends.

Talk about strange. How did a little church get big? What are whites and blacks doing worshipping together in a time of intense racial conflict? What are the dead doing among the living? How can a murderer and his victim exchange the peace of God?