

## The Time Is Noon

Did I miss something here? I mean, weren't we just in this room just a few days ago celebrating the birth of the baby Jesus? Here it is a mere five or six days later, and the "newborn babe of Bethlehem" is already twelve years old! We've moved from his birth to his Bar Mitzvah in less than a week! I know they say time goes by more quickly as you get older, but really, now: this is ridiculous!

We would like the babe to remain a babe for just a little while longer, wouldn't we? At least long enough for us to sing some more carols, finish off the eggnog, and get the pine needles out of the living room. (In our house, that usually happens around Memorial Day.) But the gospel lesson appointed for this First Sunday of Christmas catapults us through time and space from Christmas Eve in Bethlehem to Passover in Jerusalem twelve years later. In spite of the resulting whiplash, the trip is worthwhile, for reasons I hope will soon become apparent. The poet W. H. Auden described the situation well in his poem "After Christmas." It begins with a description:

"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  
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...."

but then Auden moves us from the mundane realities of life-after-Christmas, to the spiritual realities. His poem continues:

"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."

An unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought of Lent and Good Friday – that may be part of our desire to keep the baby a baby just a little while longer – because we know what awaits him: scourging, mockery, rejection and crucifixion. Several details in the story of the boy Jesus in the temple foreshadow these future developments.

The setting for this story is the temple in Jerusalem; the time is Passover. In Luke's gospel, the great journey of Jesus' public ministry is similarly the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem – a journey that brings Jesus to the temple precisely at Passover time; a journey that reaches its climax not in a discussion of the law with the teachers in the temple, but a deadly confrontation with them. And those teachers do not then *commend* Jesus for his understanding as they do in this boyhood episode; rather, they *condemn* him to death on a cross for his heresy. (I wonder sometimes how many [if any] of those teachers realized that the man Jesus who now offends them was the same person as the child prodigy who had astonished them twenty or so years before.)

It is not only Jesus' condemnation and death that are foreshadowed in this story. There is more here than a whiff of apprehension at the thought of Lent and Good Friday; there is also the lovely fragrance of the resurrection. Luke subtly

tells us that his parents – frantic when they discover him missing – find him “after three days.” After three days: the same period of time as between his crucifixion and resurrection.

Perhaps now we are in a better position to understand why this story is appointed for the First Sunday of Christmas: its position in the church year is exactly the same as its position in Luke’s Gospel – it forms a bridge, spanning the time between Jesus’ infancy and his ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. Like the faith itself, it holds the birth, death and resurrection of the messiah in the closest unity. The boy is neither a babe nor a man. The stable in Bethlehem lies in the past. The cross on Calvary lies yet in the future, so also the empty tomb in the garden. Yet all are portended in this little story. Auden puts it this way:

“...The happy morning is over,  
The night of agony yet to come; the time is noon.”

That’s where we are, my sisters and brothers. The time is noon. We stand at a crossroads – the intersection of history and hope.

*Looking back*, we have celebrated the coming of the one we say was “born this happy morning.”

*Standing at the intersection*, we know the abiding joy of Emanuel, God with us.

*Looking forward*, we cling to a hope that transcends whatever miseries we may know, and we live as God’s people who believe and trust in the final triumph of love – the love that came down at Christmas, the love incarnate in the babe at Mary’s breast, the love that suffers with and for the beloved, the love that dies on a cross, is laid in a borrowed tomb, and rises victorious over the powers of death and darkness in order to reveal the boundless love of God for all – not some, not the chosen few, not people who look and live and love like the majority, but *all*.

The time is noon. We stand at the intersection of history and hope.

Certainly this is so for Muhlenberg Lutheran Church and for its mission and ministry. The interim pastorates of Paul and Mark draw to a close. They join the longer pastorates of Bob and Brett and Dave and Martha and Joe and K. Roy and John and Jack and all those who have served this congregation throughout its storied 170 years. The time is noon, and you now stand at the intersection of history and hope as you await with eager and justified anticipation the arrival and ministry of Pastor Lauren.

God has wondrous things in store for you as pastor and people. The Holy Spirit beckons you into a future of promise and challenge, of gift and task, equipping you with every spiritual gift to carry out the mission our Lord Jesus entrusts to you.

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I want to close with some personal words, and in doing so, I quote that renowned theologian Winnie the Pooh: “How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.” How lucky – how blessed – Pr. Paul and I are to have had the privilege of serving as your interim pastors.

We’ve reached that point at which our journey together as pastor and people comes to an end. The road forks; our paths diverge. Some of us – perhaps many of us – have difficulty saying “goodbye.” But as the moment for uttering those two syllables draws near, let the origin of the word comfort you. It was a long while ago that the four words “God be with ye” collapsed into the one word, good-bye; but that is the origin of “goodbye.”

So let us say it with that bittersweet mixture of sadness and gladness that makes leave-taking so strange: Not goodbye, but God be with ye.