



First United Church of Oak Park **This Was Never the Plan**

Luke 2:41-52

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A Christmas Oratorio – W.H. Auden

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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. 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.
And craving the sensation but ignoring the cause,
We look round for something, no matter what, to inhibit
Our self-reflection, and the obvious thing for that purpose
Would be some great suffering. So, once we have met the Son,
We are tempted ever after to pray to the Father;
“Lead us into temptation and evil for our sake.”
They will come, all right, don't worry; probably in a form
That we do not expect, and certainly with a force
More dreadful than we can imagine. 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. The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:
When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
That God's Will will be done, That, in spite of her prayers,
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.

Reading from the Book of Luke, Chapter 2:

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand

what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

This was never the plan. For Joseph and Mary, the parents of the Holy one, to lose him in a crowded pilgrimage processional. To lose track for a while of a child, this is only human. Because who can keep sight of the movements of a child all the time? And then the sudden lurch in the stomach, the realization that their child is not there, that's a different feeling, I know that feeling. The increasingly frantic hunt for the child, the double and triple checking before realizing there was nothing for it, they had no choice but to leave the pilgrimage, turn back, to retrace their steps back to Jerusalem, already tired. This was never the plan.

I wonder if that walk back to Jerusalem recalled to their minds the walk into Bethlehem twelve years before. I Wonder if the memory of that Bethlehem night was at the top of their minds.

That night had not gone to plan, either. The inn too full, a stable the only place at hand. And instead of an uncomfortable but ordinary night, that was when Mary went into labor. This was never the plan. And even then there was no peace for the parents on the first night with their first born child. There was an endless parade of visitors, each stranger than the last. Shepherds in the middle of their night with their story of hosts of angels, an army of angels, praising the child. No rest, even the dubious rest of a stable, was possible for the Holy Family. This was never the plan. I wonder if the memory of that Bethlehem night was at the top of their minds as Mary and Joseph, twelve years later, hurried back to Jerusalem to find their lost child. I'm tempted to say that they would be uniquely afraid, that for these parents the world was at stake. But the world is at stake for any loving parent. They hurried back into Jerusalem and began their search anew, only instead of a band of pilgrims that were their relatives and friends, they had to search through there was an entire city. This was never the plan. They searched for three days, three days not knowing what would happen, not knowing what the future would hold. After three days they went to the Temple. I wonder if they went there not so much to search for Jesus, but to pray. It seems to me that they were not expecting to find Jesus there, because they seemed honestly surprised to find Jesus there. This was never the plan.

And those Torah teachers at the temple! They had just finished with Passover, and were undoubtedly looking forward to some downtime and a slower season. And instead here is this perspicacious child of 12, lost, in need of care and some way to pass the time. And so they did what they could and gave him what they had to give which was the stories of the faith. And these teachers, for their flexibility, their reward was that they alone got to know what sort of questions Jesus had about the scriptures.

This was never the plan. It's not any kind of plan at all, in fact. The life of Jesus seems shot through with this sort of happenstance and accident and risk and error. The life of the one who was to deliver the people, well, he seemed constantly in need of rescuing himself. This was never the plan, it was too wild and wonderful to be any sort of plan at all.

Looking back over these stories from 20 centuries' remove, it is easy to read them and imagine they must have been this way, they seem timeless as the hills, a sign and symbol of all that is right in the world. But without the haze of a vast expanse of time between, these stories are ones of people barely scraping by, barely figuring things out as they go along, of families adapting to impossible circumstances, of God's presence through it all even so.

This year, as we wind it down, a few days more left only, honesty compels me to say that this is not where I had hoped things would be. Our families in the church our struggling, our elders of the church are struggling, the young people of the church are struggling. And just at the low ebb of energy that this winter found us comes yet new uncertainty and calculation. This was never the plan. But there has been also, too, so much to celebrate, so many ways that I have seen our people adapt, making a way out of no way, reordering everything in their lives, everything in their families and their work, reordering it all to find a way to make what matters stand at the heart of their lives, of reordering everything out of love for one another. Our worship services are joyful and lovely, and the presence of God is here, surely. Our love for one another as a community has if anything grown out of our knowing what a precious thing it is to be community.

This was never the plan, not for Mary and Joseph hunting for their child, not for First United, not for Jesus stranded for a three-day-long impromptu Bible study for three days from some very accommodating Torah teachers at the Temple. It was never the plan that we would have to learn again and again to start the faith as from the beginning, to make a way in the wilderness, to wonder if that might somehow become a home. This was never the plan, it

was never any kind of plan at all; it's all too wild and wonderful to be any sort of plan. Amen.