

**1-1-17 "Hope Is Not Blind Optimism" A Reflection on Mt. 2:13-23 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK**

"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  
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 of our relatives, and in general  
Grossly overestimated our powers."

With any luck you have recognized these words as the work of poet W. H. Auden, written during the darkest of times of WWII. They are words of the Narrator from a very long poem titled *For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. By some grace I have frequented Auden's classic on many occasions during this "off-Sunday," this dramatically in between time of the year—between holidays, between years, between what has been and what will be—as his sensitivities repeatedly speak to something deep in me; and this time around, I confess, all the more so. "The poem is a series of dramatic monologues spoken by the characters in the Christmas story and by choruses and a narrator. The characters all speak in modern diction, and the events of the story are portrayed as if they occurred in the contemporary world" (Wikipedia). So, with me, may we together be receptive vessels—from Auden:

"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...

...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.

...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."

Yes, as is unmistakable to any reader of any Bible, the scene of exotic and adoring Magi presenting the baby Jesus with gifts on bended knee ends abruptly. Right from the "get go" of our little Lord Jesus' life we hear there are but precious few moments to fall sleep in the hay; God's own Son becomes a transient, homeless, migrant, alien, refugee fleeing under the protection of night for life itself, a chance at a tomorrow, claiming a hope that something better, somewhere, somehow awaits. How apropos in such a tragic sense, to visit with this lesson from Matthew at the end of a year that has been the deadliest for refugees since 1942—again the depth of WWII—some 7000 plus men, women and children, civilians of course, perished this past year while fleeing for safety in the same way our Mary, our Joseph, our Jesus fled from the forces of true evil. In a few pages baby Jesus will be all grown up and we will hear him proclaim, *"Foxes [like Herod] have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* I guess once a refugee, always a refugee. I guess the experience of being a refugee forever changes one's outlook and sensitivities. I guess once God has entered and affected your life—as God so full and powerfully did to our Christmas infant—God forevermore enters and affects the human condition.

When the Magi *"go home by another way"* and fail to report back to Herod as to the exact street address where the newborn King of the Jews could be found, Herod realizes he has been duped...and he is infuriated, and as his power is unchecked, orders are give, a genocide ensues, hundreds, thousands of boys two years old and under, in and around Bethlehem are slandered. Mary and Joe's boy is not among them, although his day will come. Blessed by Providence, Herod fails to find him, but later rulers will not fail as our Christ too is destined to become one among the torrid statistics compiled by nationalistic and imperial powers gone wild.

Here is a small part of the "Herod" section of Auden's poem, where King Herod is explaining how it is necessary to hunt down the Christ Child and kill him:

"Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions..."

Whole cosmogonies will be created out of some forgotten personal resentment, complete epics written in private languages, the daubs of schoolchildren ranked above the greatest masterpieces.

Idealism will be replaced by Materialism...

The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively of hermits, bums and permanent invalids.

The Rough Diamond, the Consumptive Whore, the bandit who is good to his mother, the epileptic girl who has a way with animals will be the heroes and heroines of the New Age, when the general, the statesman, and the philosopher have become the butt of every farce and satire."

Every since entering public life President Obama has offered those with ears to hear a keen insight, "hope is not blind optimism." "Hope," he maintains "is that thing inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us if we have the courage to reach for it, and to work for it, and to fight for it." in other words, hope for the survival of the innocent that the triumph of Reason requires involves immense quantities of sweat equity. During pleasant and calm days there can be no resting on ones' laurels. Hope is exacting, it requires perpetual toil, engagement struggle, the flight from genocide, the flight to safety. Of course, *en route*, hope must tally the costs and the casualties, from the children in and around Bethlehem then, to the children in and around Aleppo today. The costs and the causalities can never be forgotten, lest we succumb to an age when the blind lead the blind and all hope is poured out upon the ground.

And so my friends, now that Christmas is here, how will you live in light of our vulnerable, refugee infant from God?

Now that Christmas is here, will you with other like-minded people find the courage to fight for hope?

Now that Christmas is here, will you join forces with those initiatives already underway to protect the environment and form safe communities for immigrants?

Now that Christmas is here, will you by voice and vote and footprint, work to preserve if not strengthen civil liberties and civil rights wherever they are threatened?

Now that Christmas is here, will you seek to highlight the problems and struggles and inequities endured by the rural poor from sea to shining sea?

Now that Christmas is here, will you join with those who are attempting to reawaken America to the injustices that surround issues of class and extreme wealth?

Now that Christmas is here, will you figurative travel the earth seeking the home that all humanity can together embrace as a safe haven?

Now that Christmas is here, will you remain restless until the promise and potential of Christmas becomes your neighbor's reality? ...until Christ is all grown up in you?

-Amen