

I don't know about you, but I find myself, during these weeks leading up to Christmas, filled by the joy and anticipation of the season and...running pell-mell from one thing to another. This combination of joyful celebration and slightly frenetic preparation colors the lives of most of us, I think.

I'm not complaining; I simply want to acknowledge the beauty, joy, and complexity of the season. My wife, Barbara is also a priest. The other day she was expressing her concern of not being able to get everything done. I reminded her that this is one of the gifts of being an Episcopalian: "*You don't have to do everything this year!*" We are a liturgical church that has rich traditions that run through the ages and creative new ways to express and celebrate our life in Christ.

It occurred to me while reading this week's passage that this is especially true of Christmas. We don't have to prepare for all of it in Advent. We don't have to celebrate everything about the Incarnation on December 25th, or even during the "twelve days of Christmas". As the Godly Play curriculum says, "The mystery of Christmas is too big for just one day and so it spills out into twelve days." And I would take it even a step further: There is just too much joy, too much courage, too much tenderness, too much hope, too much promise to squash into a single day, twelve days, or even the four weeks of Advent *and* the twelve days of Christmas. Perhaps we would be wise to defer some of our celebrations to the new year, when the tree has come down and decorations have been put away, when we go back to work or school, and when the credit card bill for the Christmas festivities arrives and demands to be paid.

Perhaps, the promise of Christmas is most needed *after* Christmas. Which means that this is the perfect time to remind ourselves that the significance of Christmas doesn't end on December 25, but really just begins during those days *after*—without the songs and lights and feeling slightly worn out from all the celebrating. Getting back to routines of ordinary time can seem suddenly harder to imagine that God would deign to take on our form and join our lot. As W. H. Auden puts it in his magnificent Christmas poem, "For the Time Being":

*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.*

The reading from Mark's Gospel this day supports, I think, this extension of the meaning of Christmas. And since Mark tells no Christmas story, Mark invites us to extend the significance of the entire Gospel beyond the confines of Christmas and the story he tells.

Mark doesn't begin: "The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," but rather "The *beginning* of the good news...." It's so easy to be taken off guard by the brevity of Mark's opening line – no angels and shepherds, no genealogies or hymns to God's eternal Word. I think Mark is trying to tell us something, through the open-ended nature of his opening. I think Mark is suggesting that his whole story about Jesus, beginning with John the Baptist and running through the calling of his disciples, exercising demons, healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and culminating in his death and the declaration of his resurrection...is all *just the beginning*.

The story of the good news of Jesus Christ continues—to this day and among us! Given the headlines and upheaval and unrest and general anxiety of these days, that comes to me as such a timely word.

I wonder, can we pause amid the frantic and joyful preparations of the season to be reminded that God is still with us, working through us, continuing the story of the good news among us...and will keep at it well after this season ends. This story is bigger than the news stories we hear or the worries we harbor or even the hopes we share.

God is not done. We are not yet what we have been called to be. The promise of Christmas is bigger than we'd imagined. And God's mercy and blessing extends farther and deeper than we can imagine. This really is *just the beginning*!

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St. Thomas' Church, Camden