

THE MOST TRYING TIME OF ALL

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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The December holidays always arrive as a series of sharp counterpoints. The festive light of Hanukkah candles and Christmas trees illumines the darkest time of the year. The holidays themselves, which today we celebrate by gift-giving and merry-making, originated from experiences of oppression and brutality — by the ancient Greeks in the case of Hanukkah and by the ancient Romans in the case of Christmas.

In her short prose poem titled “Triage,” the German-born American poet Lisel Mueller writes, “Bertolt Brecht lamented that he lived in an age when it was almost a crime to talk about trees, because that meant being silent about so much evil.” To celebrate the elm trees along Chicago's lakefront, she says, “is to be silent about the people who sit and sleep underneath them, the homeless poor who are hauled away by the city like trash, except it has no place to dump them.” The poem concludes, “To speak of one thing is to suppress another. When I talk about myself, I cannot talk about you. You know this as you listen to me, disappointment settling in your face.”

Whenever Holly and I decorate a Christmas tree, I inevitably think of this poem. As we hang our ornaments, many of which remind us of people we love, or places we have been, or experiences we have enjoyed, I also call to mind what we are being silent about. Especially in the darkest season of the year, I call to mind those whom love has forgotten and enjoyment has bypassed, who may have no tree to decorate or even a home in which to decorate it.

The evil in our world — racism, sexism, bigotry, poverty, and so on — surrounds us on every front. The way we celebrate the intertwined holidays of Hanukkah and Christmas often distracts us from the brokenness of the world, when it should do the opposite. The true meaning of these holidays shines through as we confront the evil around us.

After all, that's why the story of Jesus came to be written in the first place. Former Catholic priest James Carroll, author of *Constantine's Sword* and numerous other books and novels, observes that when the gospels describing Jesus' life and ministry were written, Jesus had been dead for nearly half a century. By that time, the Jews had endured a viciously brutal occupation by the Romans for more than 200 years.

Every time the Jews rose up in revolt, the Romans would punish the perpetrators, usually by crucifixion. During the Roman crackdown about the time Jesus was born, about 2,000 Jews were crucified. By the year 70, more than 10,000 crosses ringed the hills around Jerusalem, most of them in regular use. The death toll of Jews during the

Roman occupation had exceeded one million — a proportion roughly equal to the Jewish death toll under Hitler.

In the year 70, the situation of the Jews became even more desperate. The Roman legions marched on Jerusalem in order to destroy the Temple, which had for more than a thousand years served as symbol and substance of the Jewish faith. As the Romans approached, two groups of Jews fled to safety. One group, led by rabbis dedicated to study of the Torah, settled on the Mediterranean coast and established the tradition of Rabbinic Judaism. The other group, the followers of Jesus, dispersed to Syria, Asia Minor, and North Africa.

While both groups consisted of Jews trying to keep their faith alive, Carroll says, they differed in their explanation of why the Temple had been destroyed. The first group believed the Temple had been destroyed because Israel hadn't faithfully kept God's law. The second group believed the Temple had been destroyed because Israel had rejected Jesus. The four Gospels, written by Jesus' followers in the 20 years after the Temple's destruction, argued that doubling down on Torah study wasn't the answer. Rather, the Gospels insisted, Jesus showed a better way to be Jewish — by living out the simple command to love God and love your neighbor.

It's worth noting that nearly half a century had passed after Jesus' death before anyone bothered to proclaim that his life and teachings had transformative power. It would take an additional two and a half centuries before the followers of Jesus gained significant ecclesiastical and political power. But in their darkest hour of need, with the survival of their faith hanging by a thread, this small group of Jews looked to an unlikely savior: a short-lived itinerant preacher from the hinterlands of Palestine, who had been killed by the Romans decades before. The fact that his message proved durable seems almost like, well, a miracle.

Set against this historical backdrop, the poet W.H. Auden decided in 1942 to cast the Christmas story as a response to the cataclysms of his time. His 1,500-line poem titled "For the Time Being" is subtitled "A Christmas Oratorio." With Hitler on the march and the world consumed by war, Auden writes:

The evil and armed drawn near;
The weather smells of their hate
And the houses smell of our fear;
Death has opened its white eye
And the [darkness] calls the thief
As the evil and armed drawn near.

As with the Romans, the evil of Nazism was so monstrous, its depravity so complete, that annihilation seemed almost inevitable and any other outcome virtually impossible. Even those who escaped Hitler wouldn't escape eventual death by other causes. Staring fully into this existential abyss, Auden writes:

We who must die demand a miracle.
How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
The Infinite become a finite fact?
Nothing can save us that is possible.
We who must die demand a miracle.

The miracle, in Auden's subsequent retelling of the Christmas story, is not the magical means of Jesus' conception, but rather the miraculous impact of his teaching and example. In fact, what his followers learned from him wasn't that he could defy tyrants and survive, which he didn't. Indeed, many of his followers then and since have perished by the sword. Instead, they learned that a life of love and service can have transformative power.

Miracles, in other words, mostly happen not in life-and-death struggles between good and evil, but in day-to-day efforts to prove ourselves worthy of the time and gifts we have been given. These ordinary times — Auden calls them “The Time Being” — challenge us to confront the ordinary evils of our time, by finding the lost, feeding the hungry, healing the brokenhearted, comforting the bruised, and freeing the captives.

In the final section of his poem, about what follows after Christmas, Auden points out how easily we can be distracted from this transformative work.

He writes:

Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility...
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...
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.

To those who have seen the child, Auden says, the time being is the most trying time of all. My own view is that Auden doesn't mean that the time being is the most

frustrating or vexing, but rather that it's the time that most puts us to the test. The time being asks us to prove our moral courage — to reveal what kind of difference we are committed to making.

Hanukkah and Christmas remind us that miracles can happen — what's infinite can become a finite fact. Hanukkah reminds us that a small and committed group of people can redeem the time. Jewish warriors known as the Maccabees, whose name in Hebrew means “strong as a hammer,” fought against the Greek occupying forces until they reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem for Jewish faith and practice. According to legend, the victorious Jews wanted to rekindle the eternal flame in the Temple, but they had only one flask of oil, enough for one day. They lit the flame nonetheless, and it miraculously burned for eight days, until more oil could be pressed. The light of the Hanukkah menorah, with one candle burning for each of the eight days, symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness, of freedom over tyranny.

Christmas reminds us that even one person can redeem the time. A humbly-born child from Bethlehem grew up to be denounced by many of his fellow Jews before he was brutally killed by the Romans. He wasn't even a footnote to history for nearly half a century. But his life of love and service had made a lasting impression on at least a few of his followers, who continued to remember his teachings and recall his presence. In their hour of greatest need, they held him up as an example worth following, thereby redeeming their lives — and his life as well — from insignificance.

The miracle isn't that one child who could save humanity was magically born in Bethlehem long ago. Rather, the miracle is that any child born, no matter how humble or obscure, can help save humanity. If nothing that can save us seems possible, then we need to demand a miracle — a miracle of our own making.

Sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg would be a modern-day savior even if she hadn't been TIME magazine's person of the year in 2019. Her ability to galvanize people — especially young people — into action to combat climate change has been nothing short of miraculous. Abiy Ahmed Ali, child of a small village in central Ethiopia, would be a modern-day savior even if he hadn't won the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. His early actions as prime minister of Ethiopia to lift the country's state of emergency, grant amnesty to thousands of political prisoners, discontinue media censorship, legalize outlawed opposition groups, dismiss leaders suspected of corruption, and significantly increase the influence of women gave him the credibility to make peace with Eritrea.

What is the meaning of these festivals of light in the season of greatest darkness? It's a reminder that we also need to prove ourselves worthy of the time and gifts we have been given. It's our turn to redeem the time — to do our part to transform the world, whether inspired by the Maccabees or by Jesus or by contemporary saviors. As you light your menorah, decorate your tree, and finish your shopping, remember that you are called to be a savior too. For the time being, we are all saviors now.