

Post-Christmas blues

Sunday's Coming Premium

February 5, 2014



Christmas trees with city recycling. [Some rights reserved](#) by [mrlerone](#)

I do not like to dismantle our Christmas tree. Before I retired I always found a way to be unavailable when the day came to put Christmas away. Now I have no excuse. It is Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, and the job must be done. I do not like it, and I don't much like the days and weeks after Christmas either. It takes so long to get here, with preparations and anticipation building from mid-November on. And then, sometime during the day of December 25, it all collapses, like a giant balloon with the air suddenly out.

W. H. Auden perfectly captures this post-Christmas ennui in *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
. . . 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 late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers.

In this issue of the *Century*, [Heidi Neumark](#) writes about how worldly Christianity is, and about how the Christmas story is most authentically presented by those among us who are the youngest ones, the imperfect ones and the marginal ones. The task

for all of us, after the warmth and excitement and magic of Christmas, is to remember that incarnation happened and is happening in this world, *our world*.

We have heard the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke all our lives. Many of us know them by heart and can recite them. But I think that the familiarity sometimes immunizes us from the power of their radical, world-changing message. The Magi make an eloquent and critical point that can reinvigorate this message for us. While the shepherds were socially and economically marginal in their society, the Magi too were marginal—racially and religiously. These Wise Men “from the East” (Persia and Babylon, perhaps modern Iran and Saudi Arabia) were scholarly astrologers and mystics who studied configurations in the night sky, believing that great events in human history were announced by the stars. When they saw something new they tracked it down.

Kings consulted them, including King Herod. In Matthew’s account the Magi believed that they had discovered the portent of the birth of a new king and traveled west, ending up in Jerusalem. That led to a visit with King Herod, which set off a series of developments: Herod’s duplicity, the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem, their joyful response at seeing the infant, their change of plans and finally the ghastly slaughter of the innocents.

As outsiders—non-Jews in a Jewish story, Persians and Arabs at the manger with these Hebrew parents and child—the Magi give us a foreshadowing of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus will shatter religious tradition and ethnic boundaries and bring strangers center stage. Before the story is over, Jesus will challenge boundaries of race, social class, status and even gender. He will welcome outsiders—sinners, the unclean, lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, poor people, women and children, Roman soldiers—and share meals with them. Jesus will scandalize some people with his radical inclusivity. Apparently he didn’t know or care about the function of a religion to define insiders and outsiders. Instead he will fling open the doors.

As I watch Christmas disappear I ponder the possibility that this year it will happen: people who have been to Bethlehem will change plans as the Magi did. This year Jesus’ modern would-be followers will quit arguing about doctrine, quit constructing barriers of race, gender and sexual orientation that keep people out, and recommit to God’s mandate, as represented by the Magi, of a community and world where all are valued and welcomed.