

# RUNNING ON EMPTY

by [Birmingham Unitarian Church](#) on Tuesday, January 10, 2012 at 2:49pm

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt  
January 8, 2012

One of the small towns in my part of southeast Texas used to include an old hotel called the Manger. My parents were disconcerted to learn that for a long time I believed Jesus had been born in that hotel. I did not appreciate their attempts to correct my understanding. Believing that Jesus was born in the Manger Hotel, a place I could see and go inside if I wanted to, was more fun for me—and my belief did bestow some significance upon an otherwise insignificant, seedy old building. Why not believe that Jesus was born in Baytown's Manger Hotel?

It is so difficult for us to move past Christmas, to return to our usual world “where Euclid's geometry and Newton's mechanics would account” for our recent experiences of magic. Even those who never quite succumbed to the Christmas spell or were too bound up in other circumstances to engage in the celebration can likewise find the shift from holiday to everyday a hard one to make. Whether holidays are a blessing or a burden for us, we are reluctant to let them pass, since saying goodbye to this holiday season involves giving up for another year—perhaps longer—so much that is special.

When Christmas passes from our lives, all the lights that it kindled seem extinguished: the lights of the Christmas tree that we now strip bare of ornaments and either pack up or throw out with the trash; the lights reflected from shiny wrapping paper and bows that had enclosed our gifts and are since discarded; the lights of candles that were seen everywhere, in homes and churches and on trees and in the hands of worshippers and in Christmas dinner table centerpieces; the lights of stars that appeared to guide us along our wandering, sometimes lost, way; the lights in the eyes of those who opened themselves to us and to whom we were open as we used this holiday as an opportunity to speak the rarely spoken feelings of affection; the lights in our hearts that marked the birth of Emmanuel, the Sacred with and in us. Now that Christmas is over, the lights die, and we and the world return to our familiar, usual state of darkness.

This movement in our Christmas experience from light to darkness also appears in the sequence of the Biblical nativity narrative. Shortly after the birth of Jesus in the stable, when the night sky had been shot with light from the heavenly host that sang for the shepherds and from the star that guided the wise men, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are fleeing for their lives, running to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous hands. One day in a stable bathed with light; the next day in Egypt, land of dark memories of an earlier bondage. An even greater darkness lies ahead for Jesus in the Biblical story: this savior figure who entered the world by starlight and angelic light will ultimately reach the absolute forsaken darkness of the cross.

Somehow, it doesn't seem fair for Christmas and all its richness to be confined to such a brief time. We have tried to widen those boundaries by starting the Christmas celebration earlier and so making it last longer. The Christmas season now begins right after Halloween, as Christmas decorations and buying pitches appear in the stores and the culture at large. But the more difficult accomplishment of stretching the boundaries in the opposite direction so that Christmas continues in some fashion beyond its official end—that we have been unable to do.

When Christmas is over, it is over, the fullness it brought us evaporates, and we proceed to run on empty for the next several months until it is time to begin the celebration again.

The light is fleeting, breaking the darkness for an instant—and then gone.

There was a time, not in time, when Gods and humans walked this earth together, enjoying an easy reciprocity. All of life was sacred then, and the whole environment, both natural and human, seemed alive, animated by a divine, mysterious presence. In time, out of time, the sacred and all its trappings—God, angels, spirits—left or were forced to leave the human realm by a secular view that preferred a carefully divided and categorized universe, and were pushed up into the sky, farther and farther away from the earth and its inhabitants.

With that division of sacred and secular, serious consequences followed. The earth that had once been regarded as alive, the Mother of us all, became a dead machine to be used and then discarded. Human beings who had earlier stood only “a little lower than the angels, . . .

crowned with glory and honour,” found their essence to be mere dust. Instead of seeming sacred, life became a profane reality of marketing and disconnection and an unending drive to consume more, more.

The elimination of the sacred dimension from everyday life did facilitate many important scientific and cultural accomplishments that would not have been possible otherwise. But it was a mixed blessing, for it also left us in the predicament of living in a predictable world of routines, lacking mystery and a felt connection to the larger Reality that encompasses our lives.

When Gods walked among us and all was holy everywhere all the time, special days of celebration such as Christmas were not so crucial. Every day, in a sense, was Christmas, for God was continually among and in us, and Incarnation—the union of extraordinary and ordinary, of divine and human, of heaven and earth—represented the abiding fact of life. Whatever celebrations occurred were designed to reawaken human awareness to the sacred presence that was always and already there.

When divinity was relegated to the heavenly sphere, high holidays such as Christmas acquired a new—and fatally exaggerated—importance. For those who dwell in a flat secular landscape, Christmas represents the one day, the one opportunity each year when the Sacred returns among us and when our ordinary two-dimensional world retrieves its lost third dimension of depth and mystery and holiness.

On all other days many of us are running on empty, multitasking our way through the world, like perpetual motion machines, hoping against hope that we have enough

spiritual fuel to get us to the next filling station—if such a place actually exists, which is questionable. With the dawning of Christmas, though, the usual emptiness is filled, and for that brief time the ever present fears of running dry, of not having enough, disappear. On Christmas Day, at least, there is enough.

Or is there? Is it really possible to get all we need on one day? Does having the Holy among us for such a short time suffice? Will a one-day dip into the lost sacred realm make all the days that follow bearable? Can the fullness we are given on Christmas Day keep us running for an entire year?

Can an automobile run forever on a single tank of gas? Can a human being run for long on the satisfaction and fulfillment drawn from a single experience? Is once ever enough? No wonder we find it hard to let Christmas, or any other special time, pass. There are no signs of filling stations farther down the road, no promise of riches yet to come. Get it while you can, says our culture, for this may well be all you ever get.

In the traditional church calendar, this is epiphany Sunday, the day when the visit of the Magi, the three Wise Men, is celebrated (the actual day of Epiphany is January 6, that 12th day of Christmas made memorable by the song).

You likely have heard the joke about a different sort of event that would have unfolded had the three Wise Men been instead three Wise Women (and our 5:00 service on Christmas Eve explored this possibility). When such a substitution is made, so the joke goes, the three Wise Women would have asked directions (rather than relying on a star), arrived on time for the birth (rather than arriving when

Jesus was somewhere around the age of two years), helped then to deliver the baby, cleaned up the stable afterwards, provided a casserole for the new parents, and brought practical gifts rather than gold, frankincense, and myrrh. A companion joke, in the form of a rebuttal by men, continues with speculating about what these three Wise Women might have said once they left the stable: “Did you see the sandals Mary was wearing with that gown?” and “That baby doesn’t look anything like Joseph!” and “Can you believe they let all those disgusting animals in the house?” and “I heard that Joseph isn’t even working right now!” and “That donkey they are riding has sure seen better days!” and “Want to bet on how long it will take for you to get your casserole dish back?” Such jokes for me add a helpful element to this overly familiar story, for they encourage a closer look at the magi themselves as humans, just like all of us, and how often we completely miss the significance of an event, arrive late or ill-prepared, respond in ways that do not show our best sides, pay too much attention to the peripheral elements and overlook the most important parts.

And yet, for all our lack of preparation and missteps, we still are welcomed in, offered a chance to behold a child, invited to experience an epiphany, drawn into that moment in the stable when everything became a You and nothing was an It. As the tradition interpreted the story, it claimed what we saw was divinity come to earth, God in the form of a particular child. And at that point, with that terribly mistaken interpretation, things went awry.

For the tradition fell into the same trap that Herod fell into, thinking that God was now confined inside a single

child, that our culture fell into thinking only one day, one time, one person, could be special. For Herod, such a conclusion meant that all children of a similar age had to be killed in order to prevent the divine child from taking over the kingdom. For the tradition and for the culture, such a conclusion has meant that an excess of attention is given to a single person and a single holiday, with the result that other persons and all other days become ordinary, without significance, just one more person, just one more day.

The epiphany the magi witnessed, and that continues throughout time and for us even now, is not that God came in the form of one child, but that Holiness and Mystery is here, among us, with us, every day, not just on Christmas Day, and all the time, not just for the brief lifetime of Jesus of Nazareth. Emmanuel, God with us, is a constant and ongoing truth; everything in the stable becomes a You, everything and everyone always becomes a You. We may leave the stable, like the magi in the joke, trying to go back to our earlier perspective where everything is an It, criticizing, let down, expecting there not to be enough—but that old illusion, that learned limitation, will not last for long.

Herod's effort to eliminate the child and the new reality that has come into the world with the child do not succeed. And the Biblical account wraps up the story observing that the magi returned to their homes, went back to the usual routines by another way. The journey was home, but the people making the journey would never experience themselves, their homes, their lives the same again. The journey would ever thereafter be by another way, made from

an utterly changed perspective in which everything would be a You and nothing would be an It.

Christmas is past, we have embarked on a new year. A newscast a couple of nights ago informed me that we are likely already breaking our new year's resolutions, especially ones that involve eating less and exercising more. Business as usual is the message from all sides.

But we are going home another way, and business as usual will no longer be possible for us. The emptiness that we once ran on has been forever filled; the moment in the stable revealed to us that everything is a You and nothing is an It, and Emmanuel, the Sacred among us, is the way things really, truly are. So forget business as usual: let the celebration continue, as all days are holidays and all life is holy from here on out.