

Found in Translation (Luke 21.25-33)
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Well, the season is upon us once again. We've passed through the Thanksgiving holiday and straight into the season of Christmas, whether we wanted to or not, whether we feel quite ready for it or not. Some of us, of course, are more than ready for it. The young and the young at heart welcome this time of year with open arms. At long last, they remind us, after an interminable year of waiting it is time to decorate the house, change the music, and make the final edits to our wish lists. I happen to live with someone who seems to have caught his very first case of the Christmas spirit. On his own, over Thanksgiving, he burst into a two-year-old rendition of "The First Nowell," that melted the hearts of everyone present and reminded us that maybe there is something about this season after all. Yet a sense of wonder is not the only thing that these days hold.

On the underside of all sweetness lie the bitter and the poignant. So it is that many of us also bring our sadness to the season because it is a sort of signpost, a marker that we come to each year to compare with the last. And the first thing some of us notice every Christmas season is who is missing. This year is no different, and there are those of us in this room, who now come for the first time without a spouse or partner, a parent or grandparent, a child, or a beloved friend. We feel these absences all the time, to be sure, but there is a special way we feel them when we hang grandmother's favorite ornament without her or hear the carol that father used to sing so badly playing on the radio. It's a season of remembrance and even grief, and sometimes it's difficult to know how to really

enter it fully. Is this a child's season of wonder or a grown-up's season of wistfulness? The answer, of course, is both, and so if we feel both then we've just about got the spirit.

In this morning's Time for Children I told a story born of my own childhood wonder and grown-up wistfulness, detailing how my father, big kid that he was, always wanted to open the presents early and had to be kept carefully in check by the rest of the family. He'd have the presents out weeks in advance in an attempt to tantalize us. "Don't you think we could open just one?" he'd ask, his bright blue eyes every bit as excited as they must have been when he was a boy. I've been smiling at that memory this week, not only because it reminds me of how playful our season of waiting can be, as I mentioned in the Time for Children, but also because it reminds me of how surprising our season can be, which I have not mentioned until just now. Because just a couple of weeks ago, before even our season began, I opened something of an early Christmas gift. I didn't actually know it was a gift, hadn't recognized it as such, and when I turned the cover to look inside I couldn't have guessed that it was tantamount to tearing the wrapping paper off something that had been on my wish list for years. To be honest, I thought I was just sitting in my study reading the sacred stories, as ministers do, wondering how to invite us all into a season that comes to us the same yet differently every year.

The Bible that I did not recognize as a gift was actually a new translation of the Christian Testament, entitled *The Restored New Testament*, by Willis Barnstone, a Professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University. Barnstone has devoted his life to the study of ancient literature, in general, and poetry, in particular, and it is with this foundation that he undertook a new translation of the Christian tradition's primary texts. His three guiding principles, as outlined in an introductory essay, are as follows:

“First...to restore the probable Hebrew and Aramaic names and so frame the Jewish identity of the main figures...Second...to clarify the origin of Christianity as one of the Jewish messianic sects of the day vying for dominion. And third...to translate as verse what is verse,” uncovering what Barnstone calls “the imprisoned poem behind the text.”¹ I was intrigued enough by the introductory materials to keep on reading, suspecting that it would be fun to revisit the gospel narrative with Jewish names and poetic speeches, but I had no idea how new the old story would begin to sound. Nor did I have any idea how I would rush home from work a bit more excitedly than usual and for a reason that you never hear from liberal ministers. “Good day at work?” “My goodness, yes! I’ve been reading the Bible.”

Now I don’t want to spoil too much of this for you, but let me just give a few hints of the freshness of Barnstone’s translation. For starters, there is the name of Jesus himself, which Barnstone renders Yeshua, a moniker much closer to the name the historical Jesus likely went by. Yeshua is actually just the short form. In full, Jesus is referred to as Yeshua ben Yosef, which sounds like someone who might currently be on a government no-fly list, but actually just means, “Jesus son of Joseph.” The other characters have their own similarly Semitic names, and, as I turned the gospel pages, one after the other, resituating stories I have always known in their newly ancient context, the narrative nearly jumped from the page. It did this, in part, because much of it wasn’t narrative at all. In seeking to recapture the poetry of Yeshua’s teachings, Barnstone lines out many of those teachings in verse. “To most of us it is a secret,” he writes, “that Yeshua’s

¹ Willis Barnstone, “Why a New Translation?” *The Restored New Testament: A New Translation with Commentary, Including the Gnostic Gospels Thomas, Mary, and Judas* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 14.

speech takes the form of poems. Even more obscure is the notion that the authentic core of the gospel stands in verse. This translation introduces the Jewish messiah of the Christians as the great oral poet of the first century C. E., who heretofore has been our invisible poet.”²

What follows, I should mention, is not simply a romantic, liberal pipe dream of Jesus, but an earthier, Jewish-sounding Yeshua who speaks in poems and parables of dangerous subversion. Sometimes he sounds the wisdom teacher, his newly-lined verses echoing a Buddhist sutra or a Ram Dass poem. Sometimes he sounds the holy fool, calling to ancients and moderns alike to forgo convention and follow a completely different path. At other times he sounds strangely apocalyptic and perhaps even a step or two off in his conviction, as in this morning’s text, where he claims that his generation would not pass by until any number of signs and wonders had been seen. Yet throughout Barnstone’s translation runs the strange admonition that, though the sky and the earth may pass away, Rabbi Yeshua’s words will not. They remain to haunt, to whisper, to wake. “We receive the story and his words with astonishment,” writes the translator. “We enter the day and the night of the tale, never to return the same.”³

It wasn’t actually Barnstone who convinced me that there was poetry hidden in the narrative. It was the rabbi himself, whose words came again, as they do every year, into a season when we gather to wait for them. And here the invitation is not necessarily for each of us to rush out and buy an expensive new translation of the Bible during our most consumptive season. Here the invitation is simply to dust off any one of our old Bibles—

² Barnstone, “Restored New Testament as Poem,” *The Restored New Testament*, 37.

³ Barnstone, “Bon Voyage,” *The Restored New Testament*, 119.

the majestically-antiquated King James, which comes off like Shakespeare, the New International, which is easy to read and light on the page, the Revised English, which goes well with a cup of tea on a rainy day, the New Revised Standard, which deserves a pat on the cover for its scholarship, or any number of other translations. We do this not for the purpose of getting the story exactly, literally right. No, this is not the season of exactitude. This is rather the season of watching and waiting, the season of imagination and invitation, the season of wonder and wistfulness that invites us to revisit the sacred stories and find the poetry lying hidden within them.

“The sky and the earth will pass away,” said our rabbi. “But my words will not pass away.”⁴ Neither will the season we remember them. So may it be with each of us this Advent as we search for what is sacred and hope to be surprised once again.

⁴ Loukas (Luke) 21.33, *The Restored New Testament*.