

January 3, 2016

Tim Hughes

Sermon: The Epiphany Moment

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,

they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon:

I was happy to notice, the other day, that the Nativity alien has resumed his post over on the corner of Howard and 28th Street. If you are ever in Remington you may know the Nativity scene of which I speak. It's a familiar entourage of plug-in plastic figurines that pop up all over town this time of year, incandescent in the evening rush hour traffic. Mary and Joseph kneel in frozen adoration on the rooftop of a row house porch, surrounded by glowing plastic angels and shepherds and donkeys. The baby Jesus shines back at them in heavenly peace.

But in the rear of this Nativity scene in Remington, however, there is a bright green alien, nearly three feet tall, watching over everything with a very wry extraterrestrial expression. He has all of the traditional "Area 51" features – the big bulging eyes, the Grinch-like head.

Now - I can't claim to know the intentions of the owners of that home, or what they think it all means. My first reaction, besides laughter, was that it's intended to be irreverent – most of the decorations in Hampden and Remington are.

But intentional or not, I've decided that the Nativity alien captures a truth about the birth of Jesus that is worth remembering – even celebrating. Which is why this year – my third Christmas in Baltimore, I was pleased to see the little green guy take his place around the manger.

Every year the Wise Ones shuffle into town from the East, making their pronouncements and offering their gifts. It took me a moment to realize, as I began to prepare for this sermon, that I preached exactly these texts a year ago, January 4, 2015. For a guy like me, who really only preaches about twelve times a year, that kind of redundancy can feel a little

disappointing. So many amazing stories in this book, and we are back with the Wise Guys.

So I pulled up the old sermon – last year’s thoughts and reflections on Matthew 2, mostly to avoid repeating myself. What became immediately clear is that while the Scriptures are the same, our context has changed so much, and that makes all the difference in the world.

One of my preaching professors in seminary was named Charles Bartow. He liked to talk about “the preaching moment.”¹ While one can talk about a sermon as a written document or a speech delivered, the preaching moment is a theological idea. A sermon can be written on a computer and stored away, but the preaching moment, is a dance between at least four parties. The Biblical text offers ancient insight. The preacher brings her thoughts and preparation. The congregation gathers and opens their minds and hearts. And finally – essentially - the Holy Spirit moves in and among everyone, triggering thoughts and feelings and making meaning.

This collision of preacher, text, congregation, and spirit – located in a particular time and space - constitutes the preaching moment. It is bigger than any particular party and more than the sum of its parts.

Also, while a text and even a sermon exist in time and can recur again and again, the preaching moment occurs only and exactly once. It is unique.

It feels appropriate to me to bring that kind of lens to today’s worship service, in which we celebrate the Festival Day of Epiphany. The word epiphany literally means “light,” and can refer to an unexpected or abrupt realization. Today’s Scripture reading contains both light *and* revelation, an unexpected encounter with the Christ Child under a brilliant and rising star.

It is a text, like the Wise Men, that we encounter year after year. But what might be that unique thing, that epiphany, that comes to us today?

¹ Charles Bartow, “The Preaching Moment.” Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1995.

First things first: the text.

The Wise Men appear only in Matthew's Gospel, and only in the passage that we read today. While it is a very familiar text because of pageants and nativities, you'll notice right away what is NOT there.

There is no indication that there were three of them, for starters. Their entourage could have been much bigger. The tradition of the three wise men originates from the three gifts they were said to offer Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Secondly, there is no indication that they were kings. The Greek word that Matthew uses to describe them, "magous," is most accurately translated "magi." A magi, according to most secular sources, is a Zoroastrian or Pagan priest. The magi of Persia were known for their astrological knowledge, their wisdom, and as the English cognate suggests, their *magical* powers.

By the time the King James Translation of the Bible was created in 1604 there was considerable anxiety about locating these pagan magicians in the birth story of Jesus Christ. Hence the translation "Wise Men," and the rapidly accepted idea that they were kings instead of priests or sorcerers.

Martin Luther himself went to great lengths to distance the Magi from the Occult.² They were rather, he insisted, scientists of the natural world, who would never dabble in anything so devious as sorcery.

That's all well and good, Martin Luther, but there's no getting around the notion that pagan astrologers from another country followed the stars to Jesus. In fact, they found him faster than kings, Pharisees, scribes, and almost all the most religious people.

² Richard Trexler. "The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of the Christian Story." Princeton University, 1997.

There is a lovely, kid-friendly sermon to be offered here about the virtues of gift-giving. The Wise Men faithfully delivered their gifts to Jesus, prompting us to ask what we too might give to God. There's nothing wrong with that sermon.

But it's interesting to see how quickly the more subversive elements of the narrative were hardened into Christmas carol fodder. It's easier, after all, to fawn over a child fumbling down the aisle in an over-sized crown than to ask what such aliens were doing in the Nativity scene.

When I mull all of this over and ask what is happening in this present preaching moment – I can't help but be amazed by how relevant the alien became in 2015. And I'm not talking about Star Wars. I'm talking about that deep-seated fear of the Other – the different ones who are coming among us to change our way of life.

I'm sure we could all cite out loud together the laundry list of people groups that are painted as alien, different, dangerous. None of that is new, of course.

What feels new – at least in my lifetime – is the way that this fear-mongering is moving from the political fringes of our culture into the mainstream. The talking points your racist uncle likes to spout at Christmas Dinner are now the policy positions of leading Presidential candidates.

There is no immigrant or terrorist that we cannot thwart with bigger guns and higher walls, the thinking goes. Gated communities and vigilant neighbors will keep young black men from invading our homes. Homeland security will keep Muslims from entering our airports. Municipal laws will keep transgender men and women from entering our restrooms. Guns will be defeated by bigger guns. Terrorists will be defeated by even greater campaigns of carpet-bombing terror.

No one ever seems to notice that these walls also box *us* in, lock *us* up, render *us* prisoners of our own never-ending fear. Nothing is ever lost

by closing the windows and barricading the doors. We have everything we ever needed, right here in our own narcissistic culture.

Do the proponents of these positions denounce their Christian faith? Do they shake with fear like King Herod, knowing the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ? In fact, they do the opposite. They baptize their hatred in Christian rhetoric and adopt a tone of righteous indignation when talking about preserving the American way of life.

So much of what constitutes American civic religion is actually a bastardized form of Christianity, tailored nearly exclusively to our own national interests.

The rhetoric demonizing any and every stranger really makes me angry. So I am very grateful for the Wise Men. If Starbucks really wanted to start a war on Christmas, they should have put a Magi on their red holiday cup: pagan foreigners indoctrinating the Christ Child with their strange ways. Once again they are hiding right in plain sight, buried under sentiment and sugar cookies. The alien in our midst, kneeling near the baby Jesus, teaching us the meaning of gifts and the power of hospitality.

The arrival of the Magi, their swift deduction of the Child's location, and their decision to bow down in worship signified a sea change in the power structures of Israel and the cult of the temple as the center of religious encounter.

Walter Brueggemann explains how more than any other Gospel, Matthew bathes his narrative in references to the Hebrew Scriptures, linking the life of Jesus to the centuries of Judaism that precede him. By choosing the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and heading to Jerusalem, the Magi are invoking Isaiah 60, a prophecy that predicts the restoration of Israel after centuries of chaos. Isaiah predicts the restoration of Jerusalem in glowing and worldly terms, describing a thriving business economy, and an influx of money and power. Such a passage was very appealing to kings and Pharisees invested in the maintenance of the status quo.

Imagine their disappointment, then, when the biblical scholars in Herod's own court suggest that the Magi were following the wrong prophecy! They quote a very different text: Micah 5. Far from enshrining the religious elite, Micah foretells the arrival of a peasant Messiah in the dusty bumpkin town of Bethlehem, nine miles south of the capital city.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days.
...for now he shall be great
 to the ends of the earth;
 ⁵ and he shall be the one of peace. (Micah 5:1,2,5)

"Our task," Brueggemann writes, "is to let the vulnerability of Micah 5 disrupt the self-congratulations of Isaiah 60. Most of us are looking in the wrong place. We are off by nine miles." ³

Armed with this new information, the Magi adjust their trajectory by a mere nine miles and trek towards Bethlehem. The rest of the story is history.

When I look at the circuitous route that led the Magi to Jesus, I see Bartow's preaching moment played out in narrative form. The wise ones began with Scripture, taking their cue from Isaiah and opening their hearts to where God might be leading. Who knows if they would even have spoken of God? They followed the stars, the guiding lights that had brought them thus far.

This was an earnest search, but alone it was not enough to guide them to the manger.

³ Walter Brueggemann, "Off By Nine Miles," *Christian Century*, December 19, 2001.

The story continues with religious leaders, diligent in their study and their preservation of tradition. They knew the prophecies inside and out. They knew about Bethlehem. They were earnest and deeply religious. But it was not enough to guide them to the manger.

It was in this weird collision between experience and tradition, insiders and outsiders, that the Magi caught a glimpse of the way to Jesus. But even that would not have been enough. In the end, they still followed the spirit, born among them and before them in the form of the star.

Text and preacher and community and spirit constitute the preaching moment, a space that is somehow more than the sum of its parts. Text and preacher and community and spirit coalesced around a manger in a neglected corner of the Roman Empire, signaling a new hope. I'm sure that doesn't even come close to describing how the Magi felt that night, kneeling humbling before the Savior of the world.

What does it look like in our own present moment, to participate in that holy dance, to open our hearts to the alien in our midst?

It could look like a lot of things, but it might look a little something like the Arlington Presbyterian Church.

They are our Presbyterian neighbors to the south, located right in the rapidly gentrifying Columbia Pike community. Their church has been in the neighborhood for over 100 years, but nearly everything else has changed dramatically.

“Again and again they heard the same reports from working class residents, many of them immigrants” goes the story from the Washington Post. “I work here, but I can't afford to live here anymore.”⁴ Meanwhile, the congregation was struggling with their own vitality and sense of mission in the community. Just recently, after years of

⁴ “The church is not the building. It is our faith and our people.” The Washington Post. December 26, 2015. www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics

deliberation, they arrived at a dramatic choice: they would sell their property to a company who builds affordable housing units. Their beautiful stone building will be replaced with 173 affordable housing units, marketed directly to low-income senior citizens. The new construction will integrate the stones of the existing church into its façade, and the congregation will continue to worship onsite in a rented space on the first floor.

Susan Etherton, an elder at the church, explained that the congregation had been acutely aware of the housing crisis in their community for years. What prompted them towards this dramatic course of action? It was sitting down and listening to the stories of their neighbors, many of whom were on the edge of eviction.

“When the congregation heard those stories of hurting and heartbreak,” she reported, “there was head-nodding and agreement. When you tell personal stories, they have a resonance.”

This story has only just begun, of course, and while the emphasis at the moment is on the brave action of this church, I suspect that time will also tell the story of the way in which this struggling church receives new life from this critical moment – new energy, new purpose, new faces in the pews – the unexpected gifts of strangers in their midst.

When I drive past the Nativity Alien on Howard Street, I try and let it serve as a reminder. The only reason why, we – the Gentiles, the foreigners, the ones who weren’t there – the only reason why we know *anything* of Jesus is because we were welcomed in the door like unfamiliar aliens. In that weird, uncomfortable collision of tradition and innovation, belief and experience, family and stranger, a light appeared which led to Jesus. A light which speaks of a hope for the world that is born not by ironing out our differences but by welcoming, acknowledging, and exploring them.

It’s a familiar story – so familiar as to feel banal sometimes – but the little green man is there to remind me that when it comes to Jesus, something new is always happening. Some strange thing is always

there, asking to be included, asking to be understood, asking to be welcomed like Jesus welcomes us.

We make a serious mistake when we think of welcoming the stranger as some sort of good deed – the next step towards our Christian merit badge.

No. All too often that strange place is the cutting edge of God's future, the place where light enters the world, a rebuke of the guns and walls and war-mongers who shake in their boots, so angry and afraid at the same time.

There is another way, as old as God's story and as new as this present moment. It's something we know by heart and it's something we've never seen before.

It's a theological idea, yes, but let's not use that to let ourselves off the hook. It's also your neighbor, your co-worker, the man on the corner. It's someone in this room.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood. It is happening right this moment, this Epiphany Day, 2016, in a manner that has never happened before and will never happen again. How and when and from who will you receive it?