

“Signs of Departure”

*A sermon preached on Matthew 2:1-12 by Emily Hull McGee
on January 6, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

It seems to be a rite of passage among preachers to have a classic and memorable Christmas pageant story. You know the ones — the time that the live donkey ran amok in the drive-through nativity, or the year the angel got scared at his big line and cried in fear and trembling through the big line: ‘do not be afraid!’ I don’t have mine — yet! **Fingers crossed that next year’s the year!** But one I love tells of an elaborate production of the Christmas story that unfolds on the church’s front lawn. Nervous preteens in coat-hanger-wire angels’ wings aren’t the primary actors, but rather major community leaders inhabit the roles of Mary and Joseph, shepherds and wise men.

In the memorable year, the group of businessmen playing the wise men decided to up their game and show up last year’s crew by arriving on the lawn in swirling clouds of incense. From the neighboring Greek Orthodox church, they borrowed a thurible — that metal container where incense is burned — and got it good and ready that night in the church basement where they waited ‘backstage.’ They lit the incense there right before their big entrance, clouds of it billowing around them and filling the air around them. No sooner had they headed out across the lawn to the manger did the church’s fire alarm go off, fooled by the smoke into alerting the fire department of a fire in the building.

You can see the scene, can’t you — wise men smugly swinging their incense into the crowd as fire trucks come screaming up to the building,

Mary instinctively clutching the baby doll Jesus a little tighter at all the commotion, one stray shepherd trying to help the firemen roll out their hoses. But when the fire chief noticed the wise men surrounded in the fragrant smoke of incense, he realized what had happened and bellowed across the lawn, "You wise men are setting off alarms all over town!"¹

II.

It's Epiphany, of course, the festival day in which Christians around the world celebrate those wise men — not of modern-day alarms and incense, but of eternal revelation and light — the first to recognize God's revelation in Jesus Christ, the first Gentiles to receive the good news. That's what the word *epiphany* means here: sign, or revelation, or manifestation of God in Christ.² It's the extended season after Christmas where the stories of Jesus told through lectionary will help us to understand who he is, where he's found, what he's about, why it matters — if only we are willing to look at these signs and let them lead us to Christ.³

We take our cue from the magi of Matthew, astrologers and philosophers practiced at looking into the darkness to find subtle shifts and clues about the nature of life. But what they see in this darkness is a star — unseen by others, unshakeable to their eyes. To them it was a sign of a new king, one who propels them to Jerusalem where kings sit and rule to learn more about the one to whom they'll pay homage. But Herod, the king ruling over Jerusalem and all the land was distressed at news of another, news of

¹ A story shared by Rev. Tom Long in his sermon "The Wrong Town at the Wrong Time," Day1, January 6, 2019, http://day1.org/8313-tom_long_the_wrong_town_at_the_wrong_time.

² William J. Danaher Jr., "Matthew 2:1-12," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p214.

³ Helpful description of 'epiphany' from Peter Gomes, "Baptism," *Sermons*, p31.

one he immediately perceives to be a threat. “When he heard this, he was frightened,” Matthew says, “and all Jerusalem with him.” In his terror that one could upend the power he so freely enjoyed, Herod assembles his Jewish advisors to ask if what the magi proclaimed could be true. “Yes,” they said, reading from the prophet Micah of the ruler born in Bethlehem to shepherd the people of Israel. Leaning into his practiced habits of deceit, Herod asks the wise men to go and find the child, returning to let him know of his whereabouts. It seems wise men really DO set off alarms everywhere!

You know what happens next in the familiar story – the wise men follow the star until it stopped over the place of the child. Overwhelmed with joy, they knelt before the babe in Mary’s arms, releasing their precious gifts before the One they knew to be a king. Transformed and aware of what would await them in Jerusalem, they returned home by another way.

III.

As we pack up our decorations and bid farewell to the intimacy of this story for the year, I find myself wondering: where am I in this story right now? Which of the nativity characters fits the shape and space of my heart in this season? As a child, I joined my church friends each year in becoming a wandering herd of sheep or their shepherds clad in bathrobes and old bed sheets. In my call here to be your pastor, I held to the experience of Joseph: hearing an unmistakable invitation from God that I didn’t fully understand, one that thrilled and terrified me, one that asked for my willingness to say yes without knowing all the answers. In years past when my babies were young, I resonated with mother Mary: nursing and rocking and gazing upon the miracle in her arms, sharing her gift with those who’d come to see him,

understanding in an instant that her life is no longer her own. Occasionally on a Sunday morning, I'll channel my inner angel: not, let me clarify, to be 'angelic' in the purest sense of the term, but rather to try and summon a fraction of the power and the presence of that divine host who tore open the heavens to proclaim good news of great joy for all people.

But this year, I find myself meditating on the magi and their courage to depart what they knew, who they were, and where they were rooted, simply because they'd caught a glimpse of a light they just couldn't shake.

As rich as is Matthew's telling of the story, there's still so much we don't know about these wise men: how many traveled with them, how long it took them. We don't know what they had to give up in order to follow that star, or what threats to their lives or livelihoods they had to endure along the way. We don't know what their overwhelming joy looked like when they arrived with the babe, or how they even began to explain themselves to sleep-deprived parents of a newborn whose world had already been upended on an intimate and cosmic scale. We don't know.

Regardless of what we know or don't, I'm increasingly drawn to those magi and find myself looking for the magi of *this* moment to see what sign of God they might reveal. I'm wondering if like those wise men of old, the wise ones of today might be those who'd be called outsiders, foreigners, different, peculiar; those who see what others cannot; those who represent the breadth and depth and height and length of God's inclusive love for this world; those sensitively attuned to the ways God uses the natural world to instruct and invite; those willing to defy the powerful to behold the powerless; those resisting the Herods of this world and holding fast against

their fear and rage unleashed as their power and position are threatened by the very ones they oppress; those who hold their beliefs, convictions, and ways of life loosely enough to be able to lay them down when God puts before them an irresistible beckoning; those whose unexpected recognition of the Christ in our midst holds the possibility of changing the world.

So I'm asking myself: what can I learn from the witness of the magi? What light-bulb revelation, what sign from God, what epiphany small or large would compel me to set forth as they did – first into the unknown One they sought, and finally onto a different road home? How can I arrange my life and attune my eyes such that I'm able to glimpse God's subtle revelations, signs, epiphanies all around me every day?

And I wonder for us: what might our church learn this year from those who go looking for signs of God? How will we help each other as fellow travelers on the road to fix our eyes firmly on holy light in a world that tries to have us see all the things we don't have, things we are taught to fear, things that demand our attention? What will it ask of us to follow the signs to Emmanuel, God with us, Love made flesh, the One who comes to set the world free?

I imagine that were we to depart and follow such signs, Christ would lead us down paths of our discomfort or sacrifice, roads unfamiliar and distant. Because when God trains our eyes to start noticing hope in the mustard seed, peace in the plowshares, joy in the found coin, and love in the prodigal child walking up the driveway, I imagine we'd look less to our keyboards and mirrors and refrigerators and treadmills for our salvation. When like the magi we begin looking for signs of God's kingdom breaking in

all around us, I imagine that the fears of Herod: fear of what is to come, fear of each other, fear of losing our grip on what gives us security and identity – those fears would dull and diminish in the face of overwhelming joy we experience as we see good news magnify the poor, release come to the captives, recovery open the eyes of the blind, and freedom fall upon the oppressed. When we fix our eyes on the unmistakable light of Christ, no darkness however suffocating or grievous, isolating or scary will be able to trick us into forgetting that all creation is beloved, bound up to God in Christ, worthy of redemption and wholeness, and illuminating this world with a divine spark.

IV.

That's why this matters, this type of looking and seeing and walking as children of the Light. For we know that the sufferings of this world are real and unyielding. We experience them, we know them, we see them, we are acquainted with these griefs. We choke in the grip of addiction, we burn in the lash of abuse, we grow numb in the grind of consumer culture, we bottom out with exhaustion of life, we are paralyzed in despair over the horrors we see towards the people we can't save.

But we only have to keep reading a few more verses in the Gospel of Matthew to find that after the wise men departed, another angel came to Joseph to warn him of certain violence that was coming to their land. "Get up, take your family, and flee your home to find refuge in Egypt," Joseph was told. Herod's fear was so all-consuming and his desire for power so total, he ordered all the infants and toddlers in Bethlehem to be murdered, attempting of course to kill the one who threatened him, one he'd eventually have nailed

to a cross. If there be but hope to find in these chillingly relevant words resounding through time and space, it is that there is no suffering unknown by Christ, no darkness his Light cannot penetrate, no death that defeats the power of his resurrection and new life, no tyrants whose cruelty can stop his abundant love, no sign of fear that will ever blaze brighter in this world than his signs of hope, peace, joy, and love.

So brothers and sisters, let us look to the sky! Let us look to the roads! Let us look to the world unfolding in new life all around us! God is slipping in and those signs are everywhere, signs as simple as a star at its rising.

First — will we look for them? And then — will we let them lead us in this new day? Because even if by another way, these signs of Love's light are the ones that will lead us home. Amen!