For the Time Being

This congregation is very fortunate to have such a wonderful group of people who work at décor, here in the sanctuary and throughout the building. This past Friday morning several of them were here to prepare and update the sanctuary for today. It was time to dismantle the central Advent-to-Christmas design up front in the chancel and rearrange other items to refresh the season of Christmas. I am glad to have the nativity family front and center and to have a few poinsettias still in place as reminders that it is still Christmas—in the church, at least.

The text for today from the second chapter of Matthew, with its story of the Magi coming from the East, is one that we tend to group into the texts from Luke to complete the Christmas scene. In this year’s Christmas pageant here at Highland Avenue, I was very impressed with the very stern looking Herod. In my experience, his portrayal was second only to the enactment I saw in Nigeria where Herod’s cronies wore military uniforms and clicked their heels as they saluted him.

We regularly include the “Three Kings” in our telling of the Christmas story. I wonder if you ever thought about what it means that they were from “The East.” A children’s message I read years ago mentioned that “The Three Kings” would be from the countries we now know as Iran, Iraq and Syria! Does that change the image for you? When we play-act them we see them as bejeweled men of wealth bearing very impractical gifts for a newborn baby. Southern-born-and-raised, first-rate preacher, Thomas G. Long, refers to the Magi in the most recent issue of Christian Century as “exotic aliens.” Here’s what he writes:

“This alien exoticism is an intrinsic part of Matthew’s story of the wise men. Part of the story’s point is that even the gentiles will come from afar to bow down before the king of the Jews—but boy oh boy, these aren’t just any gentiles. These are not the sort of next-door gentiles who might have slipped over the border into Judea to help out with the wheat harvest. These are magi, astrologers, magicians from the East, carrying gold and perfumes and tracking their journey by the stars. These are gentiles with the volume turned up to 11. When they sashay into Jerusalem asking for the newborn king of the Jews, Herod and the Pharisees and the scribes could not be more shocked and perplexed if it were Gladys Knight and the Pips, woop-wooping into town on that midnight train from Georgia.”

Long concludes his essay by asserting that children the world around are “on to something” when they put on bathrobes and Burger King crowns, “imagining themselves to be part of the great story of Jesus Christ.” *(Op. cit. p. 21)*

The other major player in the story, for me, is The Star. In the part of the country where I have lived mostly, stars such as the one pictured on the front of the bulletin are a very common decoration during the Christmas season. The Moravian settlement of Lititz, Pennsylvania, is well-known for its production and display of “Moravian stars.” In our Pennsylvania home it is usually the first decoration I get out and the last one to come down.

The themes of this story of visitors from the east have captivated artists, poets and composers. One of my all-time favorites is the made-for-TV opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, by Carl Menotti. I believe I saw the very first production of it in 1952 and looked forward to seeing each year thereafter as part of the array of Christmas specials. I grew to love the operatic arguments between mother and child; the haunting music of Amahl’s oboe; the delightful calling of the shepherds who bring “whatever they have in the house” to share with the kings; and the theme of the Christmas miracle that brings healing. One of my favorite passages is the mother and the three kings interplay of answer and response. She asks first, “Who is this child for whom you have all this gold? Perhaps I know him. What does he look like?” The kings respond by asking in harmonic singing, “Have you seen a child the color of wheat, the color of earth? His eyes are mild, his hands are those of a king as king he was born?” The mother answers with her soliloquy, “Yes, I know a child the color of wheat the color of earth...But no one will bring him incense or gold, though sick and poor and hungry and cold....He is my child, my darling, my own.”

You see, I do not want Christmas to be over just yet. I am not quite ready to get back into the groove or routine of “business as usual.” I want to hold onto the message of peace on earth that the angels proclaimed. I want to look up and see the light of that star shining in the darkness. I want to hear crowds of people singing church services, “Come and worship; come and worship Christ the newborn King.”

After all, the three kings just got here! Do they have to leave already?!

Well, yes. Of course, they have to go back to their own country. It does help me to remember the last verse of the story that tells us they go back by a different way.

At the beginning of this current century, I fulfilled a life-long dream and went to France. My motto was “Gay Paree in 2003! It all started when I was in second grade in the York public schools the very year they decide to experiment with teaching French to second graders!
Because I “studied” French all through the rest of my years in York city schools, and an additional third and fourth level of college French, I can fake a pretty good French accent! #76 in the *Hymnal*, “Je louerai l’Eternal de tout mon coeur, je raconterai toutes tes merveilles, je chanterai ton nom….je ferai do toi le sujet de ma joie. Alleluia!” With the accent came the desire to visit France.

Imagine my surprise when, somewhere in a village church in the south of France, I saw stained-glass window prominently featuring the “Moravian star.” I had to ask the tour guide about it. The answer was that it is the long-held tradition that the Magi passed through this small village in France as they made their way home “by another way.” Astounding? Oui! Vraiment! But what a wonderful possibility to consider! The Christmas story, Christ come for all the world, lives and breathes and has its being in a little village in far away France—for over 2,000 years.

I know I am not alone in wanting to hold on to Christmas a little bit longer. People who say, “Let’s keep Christmas all year...” have a sense of this longing that we are left with after the holidays. Even as we recognize the necessity of moving on and getting going, we can feel a certain nostalgia and wistfulness. Some years ago I came across a portion of a longer poem by W. H. Auden called, “For the Time Being.” This week I looked it up on line and learned it is actually a much larger piece than I had guessed. The full title is: *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* and was written during the dark time of World War II. The poem is about 1500 lines long, or 52 pages.” (http://www.cs.utsa.edu/~wagner/church/auden/) Reviews of the poem have named it one of “the most powerful expressions of the meaning of Christmas in the 20th century.” One reviewer concedes, “...the poem will never replace ‘The Night Before Christmas’ or the seasonal pageant at Radio City Music Hall.” However, it concludes, “This is a Christmas for the day after Christmas. This is a Christmas for grown-ups.” (Op. cit., p. 1 of 5)

Rather than continuing to talk ABOUT it, I want to read you a one-printed-page excerpt of it to you. In the oratorio, this part is spoken (or sung?) by the narrator and comes near the end.

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servants,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid’s geometry
And Newton’s mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.”
“...In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon;
When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
That God’s Will will be done, That, in spite of her prayers,
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.”
Auden calls this “the most trying time of all...” and you and I know what he means. The wonderful, glittering lights have mostly disappeared from our neighborhoods. In their places we have seen the overstuffed trashcans and forlorn, dead trees. We may have lived in the glow of the reruns of Christmas specials, but by now, they are being replaced by the return of cops and lawyers on shows that reverberate with the latest violence of the streets, or reality shows that seem more fictitious than real. As for our lives, the truth seems even harsher than ever.

What we have to remember in this “time being” is the story of Jesus’ birth—more than our celebration of it. We remember that in the story, Jesus says and does nothing!—nothing more than to be born. And we remember he is born a King— a different kind of king. He is shepherd-king who will tend, protect, guide and nurture. How we crown him “King of Life” is up to us.

The account of the Magi’s visit to Bethlehem is, “a critical episode in the larger story of God’s redemptive plan for humankind,” writes Beverly Gaventa. (Gaventa, Texts for Preaching, Year B, p. 95)

In the end this story of the Magi reaches into “the time being” and leads us out a different way. Yes, Lent and Good Friday are not long away. But the saving grace of God is that the journey of the Magi reaches beyond strangers from the East, to a Roman centurion, to a Canaanite woman, to you and to me. And at the end of the Jesus story, his disciples go out to all nations. (Gaventa, Op. cit.)

May it be so. May we, who have come to Bethlehem, go out from here into all the world.