

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

January 6, 2019 Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

LOOKING UP, KNEELING DOWN

Human eyes are incredible things. Given adequate light, they can see a minuscule item held in one's hand. Given adequate darkness, they can see a lit candle 14 miles away or a star hundreds of light years away. These amazing organs can send complex messages to the brain helping it to perceive objects that reflect light at various wavelengths as being a rich array of colors. Not only are there muscles in the eyes to help us focus on something near or far, there are other muscles around the eyes that enable them to move to look up or down, left or right. God gives us other muscles in our neck that enables us to have an even fuller range of vision. We are also given mobility that can be used to walk over to see something that might otherwise remain hidden to our experience. We are given a mind that can direct where our eyes will look and will govern the intensity with which we focus. Of course, God has also given us eyelids to use to rest when we want to or need to shut out the world. Sometimes we use our eyes wisely, sometimes not.

If Matthew would have had an editor for his gospel, I think he would have been told to start his account of the good news in a different way. The eyes tend to glaze over from the beginning as Matthew starts with an abbreviated genealogy of Jesus, recounting the lineage from Abraham through King David through the time of the Babylonian captivity, on until his birth - not exactly a riveting first seventeen verses. Yet, there is something in that list that would have caught the eyes of those in the early church who first received this narrative. A genealogy in those days was traced through the male lineage, but Matthew breaks from tradition and includes four women in his list of the predecessors of Jesus. These four were women whose lives bore the scars of incest, prostitution, adultery, and exclusion. Two of them were foreigners. This is the beginning of the story of the person Matthew lifts up as the Messiah?

Then the gospel writer moves into an account of Jesus' birth that doesn't include some of the more inspirational parts of the nativity. Rather, the focus is on whether Joseph is going to divorce Mary in a public way, surely leading to her being ostracized for what seemed to be ever-growing evidence of her infidelity. But even while Joseph's eyes were shut in sleep, an angel intervenes in a dream telling Joseph and all of Matthew's audience with eyes now wide open that this is to be a very special birth. Coming out of this embarrassing situation will be one whose origin has to do with the very Spirit of God. The assertion is that he will be the Messiah, the most deeply anticipated royal figure, the greatly hoped-for liberator of the Jews described by the prophets. The gospel writer adds that this child would be the one who would fulfill the concept of Emmanuel, meaning God is with us. Eyelids, stay out of the way, for something absolutely new and different was taking place.

The heavens get in on the act of helping to proclaim this special birth. You might think his own people would be the first to notice this extraordinary event, but the surprises keep coming. Magi, probably astrologers from somewhere east of Israel, come looking for the one born king of the Jews. These individuals showed wisdom in looking beyond what was right in front of them and beyond normal boundaries to see and explore further what God was up to. When they come to Jerusalem in search of this newborn king, they make the mistake of asking the wrong person for directions. King Herod consults with scriptural scholars to try to find where the Messiah was to be born. Writings from the prophet, Micah, gives indication that it would be Bethlehem. Those who would use their eyes wisely look not only at what is going on before them and beyond them, but at scripture to help them become true people of vision and understanding. Herod says he too, wants to lay eyes on the child to pay him homage. And looking at the magi with lying eyes, he urges them to come back and tell him where to find the child, so he too could worship him. There is quite a difference between a ruler who is enamored with the love of power and a coming ruler who is committed to the power of love.

The magi continue to look beyond themselves, and find their way south of Jerusalem to a house in Bethlehem. When they realize they have found what they had been seeking by night and by day, they are overwhelmed with joy. They had

looked beyond their own people and their own plain to find something extraordinary that God was doing. After looking up for so long, they now had occasion to kneel down in worship. They had the foresight to bring gold to one who would serve a kingly function. They brought frankincense to honor the priestly role the child would carry out. They also brought myrrh, used normally to honor the body of one who has died in God's service. Yes, unfortunately, that would be fitting too. Matthew included such details to keep people of faith who would read his words looking to understand what God would be doing through Jesus and those who worshiped him. For even in so young a church to which Matthew was writing, it seems that their vision was limited. The boundaries of their community were already closing tightly around them. The wonderful message of Emmanuel, God is with us, had resonated with them as it does with us. But there is also the need to hear how God can work beyond us, so we won't have too narrow a gaze.

Whoever these magi were, Matthew makes it clear for all willing to see, that they were not hometown folks with hometown upbringing and values. They were from some foreign land, the kind of people many good religious types would think it best to keep distance from. As people read Matthew's story, they would have had difficulty believing their eyes as they read of the audacity of strangers from a foreign land, gentiles showing up in their homeland to worship and adore their newborn king. It was precisely the response that Matthew was working for.

Now the gospel writer could begin to unfold the rest of the story of Jesus. He could tell his first readers and even his latest readers that the saving work of God is not for some, but for all. The gospel was not only for men, but also for women. It was not only for those who obviously experienced the blessings of God, but also for those whose lives bore the scars of unmentionable human pain. It was not just for the hometown Jewish crowd, but also for those on the other side of the tracks, the next town over or for gentiles in other parts of the world. This was a story not just for those with common beliefs, but also for those who struggling to believe anything at all, or for those who might have lost their faith.

Yes, in the person of Jesus, the Messiah, God is with us, but we do well to look beyond ourselves to get a glimpse of God's great expansive plans to embrace all the people of the world. It is said, "Seeing is believing," but scripture seems to indicate that believing leads to a certain kind of seeing. Let's enter 2019 with eyes and hearts wide open so that we may look beyond ourselves to perceive the wonderful things God is doing, that we might respond with worship and the giving of ourselves in ways that honor Jesus' ministry. Human eyes are incredible things, made by One who is more incredible still, One who is with us in 2019 and beyond.

Tom Long: The Wrong Town at the Wrong Time

The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, PCUSA

Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany - Year C

January 06, 2019

Last fall in Washington, there was a very contentious Senate hearing over appointing a new justice to the Supreme Court. At one point in the hearing, one of the senators on the committee lost his temper, lost his cool, and melted down in rage. Shaking his finger at the senators from the opposing party, he shouted that they were acting disgracefully and conducting a sham process. And then he turned to the man being examined, the man who was nominated to the Supreme Court, and said to him, "You're looking for a fair process? Well, you came to the wrong town at the wrong time."

He was speaking, of course, about Washington in 2018, but ironically, we could say something similar about the wise men in our biblical story from Matthew. They came to the wrong town at the wrong time. Here's what happened in the story. Many years ago, some wise men living in the Eastern lands of the ancient world, saw an amazing sight in the heavens, the rising of a new star, or maybe it was a comet blazing brightly across the dark curtain of the firmament, and they knew that the rising of this brilliant light was a sign from the heavens, a signal that something momentous, something world-changing, had happened.

Although we sometimes sing at Christmas-time as if these wise men were kings - "We three kings of Orient are..." - actually they weren't kings at all. They were almost surely philosophers and astrologers, some think they may have been Zoroastrian priests. But, whoever they were, these wise men were shrewd observers of the night sky, those who looked for signs of decisive events and clues to the future in the heavens. So, Matthew tells us that just as Jesus was born, they saw this new star rising in the western sky over Judea, the land of the Jews. Using all their powers of analysis and interpretation, they determined that this star was a sign that a new king had been born; the Jews had been given a new king, and the lights of heaven proclaimed it. What they did not yet

know was that this new king who had been born in Judea was not only the King of the Jews, but the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the savior of all, and his name was Jesus.

These wise men wanted to see this new thing that had happened, and they desired to show their honor for the new king. So, they set out for Judea to the west, in the direction of the star that they had seen. In our imaginations, we see them riding along, mounted on camels, but the Bible does not say how they traveled. It says only *where* they traveled, to Judea, and when they got to their destination, they went immediately to the city of Jerusalem, to the palace of Herod. Now, Matthew has already told us in this story that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. But the wise men went to Jerusalem looking for the new king. If they were looking for the real king, well, as the senator said, "You've come to the wrong town at the wrong time."

Why did they go to Jerusalem when Jesus was born in Bethlehem? I think we can hear some wisdom about that question from a poor Christian man living in Solentiname, a small village in Nicaragua. Every week, the priest in this village, Ernesto Cardenal, would read a passage from the Bible to the people in his congregation, all of them poor peasants, and then they would discuss this passage, saying what they heard and what they thought. When Father Cardenal read this story of the wise men from the East who went to Jerusalem looking for the new king of the Jews, Adan, one of these impoverished Christians said,

It seems to me that when those wise men arrived they knew that the Messiah had been born and they thought Herod knew about it and that the Messiah was going to be a member of his family. If he was a king, it was natural that they should go to look for him in Herod's palace. But in that palace there was nothing but corruption and evil, and the Messiah couldn't be born there. He had to be born among the people, poor, in a stable.[\[1\]](#)

What this humble Christian was saying was that the wise men simply assumed that a king would be born in power and glory, born in the royal palace, but if the wise men thought they could find the savior of the world in Herod's house in Jerusalem, they were "in the wrong town...."

They had also come at the wrong time. Herod the Great, who was the Roman-appointed King of the Jews, was growing old, and in his aging he had become a mentally unstable tyrant, who ruled through fear and cruelty. He was so insecure about his standing that every whiff of palace intrigue and potential opposition threw him into a murderous rage. He even killed one of his wives, several of his children, and other members of his own family, fearing that they were plotting to betray him. When Caesar Augustus heard what Herod had done to his own family, he is reported to have said about Herod, "I'd rather be his pig than his son."[\[2\]](#)

So, if the wise men have come to an aging, insane, and ruthless Herod, the King of the Jews, asking about where they can find the *new* king of the Jews, well they have come to the wrong town at the wrong time. It would be like going to the Kremlin today and asking Vladimir Putin, "Where's the *new* leader of Russia? We have come to pay him homage." Sure enough, Matthew tells us that the wise men, when they told Herod that they were looking for the *new* king of the Jews, rattled King Herod so badly that he shook like a leaf in the wind, and the whole city of Jerusalem trembled with him.

There is a church I know about that has an annual Christmas pageant. Now this is not a simple event like many other churches have with the children wearing bathrobes and coat-hanger-wire angels' wings to play the parts in the Christmas story. No, this church's pageant is a major production, held on the front lawn of the church, and featuring leaders from all around the community as the main characters - Joseph and Mary, shepherds and angels and wise men. One year, the men who were playing the roles of the wise men decided that they could best show that they were mysterious visitors from the East by arriving in swirling clouds of incense. So, from a nearby Greek Orthodox church they borrowed a thurible - that's a metal container in which incense is burned. On the night of the pageant, they were in the basement of their church waiting for the cue to make their appearance on the lawn. Just before it was time for them to be on, they lit the incense in the thurible. Clouds of smoky incense filled the air, and then they headed out across the lawn to the manger.

What they did not know was that they had accidentally set off the church's fire alarm system, and the fire department had been electronically signaled that the church was on fire. As the wise men slowly walked to the manger, suddenly fire trucks arrived, sirens blaring. Soon, firemen in yellow slickers were unrolling hoses among the startled shepherds and angels. But when the fire chief spotted the wise men surrounded in the fragrant smoke of incense, he realized what had happened. In a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone, he bellowed, "You wise men are setting off alarms all over town!"

Well, Matthew would agree. Matthew would say, "Yes, that's exactly what happened." The arrival of the wise men from the East asking about a new king of the Jews set off alarms all over the town of Jerusalem, because if there's a new king of the Jews, then that means the old king is finished.

Now sometimes people will say that politics has no place in the pulpit, that preachers should stick to matters of faith and leave politics alone. But the way Matthew tells this story, he lets us know that this attitude is not right; the gospel of Jesus Christ is deeply political, and politics is thoroughly entwined into this story of the wise men. Yes, no one wants a preacher to peddle his or her party politics from the pulpit, but we cannot avoid the truth that the gospel of Jesus Christ has profound political implications. Herod was a politician, he knew that. That's why he shook all over with fear when the wise men told him that a star had risen in the sky to announce the birth of this new king, Jesus. That tyrant knew that the birth of the true king, Jesus, meant the end of his own abusive and illegitimate reign of terror. Herod did everything he could to stay in power. Matthew tells us that he even ordered the massacre of all children younger than two years old in and around Bethlehem so he could rid himself of this newborn king, and, of course, later in the story they tried to stop Jesus again by nailing him to a cross. But when Jesus Christ is at work in the world, the powers of cruelty and oppression cannot stop him. When Easter hope is alive, it is the tyrants and the power brokers and those who ignore human need for their own gain who should tremble. As the old hymn says, "O where are kings and empires now, of old, that went and came? But Lord, Thy Church is praying yet, a thousand years the same."

Eventually, the wise men figured out that if they were looking for the new king of the Jews in Herod's city, they were in the wrong town, and finally they made it to the right town. With the help of some scribes and biblical scholars, they learned that the scripture promised that Israel's Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. And they also had the help of that blazing star, which led them to the

very place where the child Jesus was. The wise men were able to pay homage to the true king and to give him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

This story makes me wonder if we, too, do not go at first to the wrong places and at the wrong times to find Jesus Christ. Herod represents everything in human beings and human history that is haughty, cruel, violent and vindictive. The Messiah was not born in *his* palace. Where is Jesus Christ truly to be found? Jesus, himself, says that the truly blessed ones are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, and it is among these little ones where Jesus is truly to be found.

Whenever the church of Jesus Christ believes the Messiah can be found in the White House or the Governor's Mansion, it's looking in the wrong town at the wrong time.

Whenever the church of Jesus Christ believes the Messiah can be found in places of wealth or in schemes to gain prosperity, it's looking in the wrong town at the wrong time.

Whenever the church of Jesus Christ proclaims that some political power broker who ignores the cries of the poor and turns a deaf ear to the pleas of the hungry, the orphan, and the alien, is "chosen by God," it is looking for the Messiah in the wrong town at the wrong time.

Jesus told us where he would be, among the hungry and the thirsty, among the stranger and the immigrant, among those who lack clothing or medical care, among those in prison. He said, "In so far as you care for the least of these, you care for me." Whenever we ignore these least ones and instead seek out the successful and the powerful, we are looking for the Messiah in the wrong town and at the wrong time.

Some years ago, a reporter from the BBC interviewed one of America's prosperity preachers, a preacher who preached a false gospel of power and wealth and worldly success and who had a large following. The reporter asked, "You preach a message of success and prosperity, don't you?"

The preacher replied, "Yes I do. I think Jesus helps us sail...not fail."

But the reporter was sharp, and she knew the Bible, so she asked, "But didn't Jesus die on a cross as one who was rejected and condemned as a criminal? How does that fit in with the gospel of success?"

"Oh," said the preacher, "like all great men, Jesus had his setbacks, but on Easter he put all that behind him."

No, on Easter, Jesus did not put the cross behind him, as if it were some unfortunate misstep in the otherwise successful journey of a powerful Messiah. The resurrection on Easter validates the gift of love and redemption that Jesus gave in his death on Good Friday, when he joined himself with all who suffer and who are oppressed. That prosperity preacher was looking for Jesus in Herod's palace, not in Bethlehem, and he was looking in the wrong town at the wrong time.

So, let us go with the wise men to Bethlehem. Let us go with our gifts of gold, frankincense, myrrh, devotion, commitment, passion, all that we have and all that we are. Let us go and truly worship

him. He wasn't born to people of power, and he wasn't born in the king's palace, but one day the whole world will bow down in worship before this newborn king, the king of mercy, the king of grace, and the king of love.

Let us pray.

O God, take us to those places where we can truly encounter your Son. Do not let us be dazzled by the powers and idols and false promises of this world, but lead us instead to the Bethlehems of life, where your saving presence can be found and your loving power is truly at work to redeem us all. In the name of the newborn king, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

[1] Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 32.

[2] Macrobius, *Saturnalia* II.4.11

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

LOOKING UP, KNEELING DOWN

Happy New Year! Or even better – may we all be fully aware of God’s blessings in 2019! This Sunday is Epiphany Sunday, a time to reflect on the story of the Magi who came to visit the Christ Child. Our scripture readings for the day will be Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12. The sermon will be entitled “Looking Up, Kneeling Down.” Worship services will be at 8 a.m. in the chapel and at 10 a.m. in the sanctuary. Communion will be celebrated at both services.

Our Adult Forum speaker this Sunday (8:45 a.m. in the parlor) will be the Rev. Tom Summers, Chaplain at Rydal Park. His topic will be “Hard Conversations,” having to do with conversations with aging parents, and looking at ways we can best be prepared for the eventualities of life.

The Bible Study Class (8:45 in room 108) led by Dr. Stephen Kim, continues its study of the Book of Jonah.

Following the 10 a.m. service, all are invited to stay to help de-green the church and then there will be a pot luck luncheon during which our new members who join in 2018 will be honored. Those with a last name starting with A-L are encouraged to bring an entrée. Those with a last name starting with M-Z are asked to bring a salad or dessert.

Let me pause and express thanks to all who helped with the busy, but joyful Christmas celebrations we had, that included such actions as publicizing, decorating, caroling, cleaning, and more. Many were greatly enriched.

I am also so thankful for those who purchased through the Alternative Gift Market. A total of purchases brought in \$5,483! These gifts will feed the hungry, comfort the brokenhearted, provide sustainable sources of income, and offer hope and relief to people, families and communities in need nearby and around the world. Together, we purchased 5 Pairs of Goats, 19 Families of Chickens, 12 Piglets, 2 Beehives, 3 Container Gardens, 21 sets of Farming Tools, 3 Trees, 9 Kitchen Kits, 8 Sewing Machines, 6 sets of School Supplies for Displaced Students, 2 Bunk Beds, 10 Refugee Food Baskets, and Winter Heating Fuel for 5 Refugee Families. Hallelujah!

Something new for us coming up: APC has been jointly planning a Martin Luther King Day celebration with First Presbyterian Church, Olney, 5435 N. 3rd St., Philadelphia, where it will take place at 1 p.m. on Monday, January 21. All of our congregation is urged to attend. State Senator Art Haywood, who serves both the Abington and Olney areas, will be the primary speaker. Our adult choir will join with the Olney choir for a joint anthem. Our APC youth group will be in attendance. There will be a documentary presentation (a portion of the PBS "Eyes on the Prize" documentary). The program is expected to last 1 hour. APC members and friends are asked to provide food for the reception following the service (please let me know what you are able to bring).

The Magi saw light from a star – may God provide light for us all during this Epiphany season!

Kirby Lawrence Hill