

THE WEEKLY WORD

Fall 2018 edition

HOWARD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

ANSWERING THE CALL, HONORING OUR QUESTIONS

by *Kenyatta R. Gilbert, Ph.D.*

Divine call assumes there is a caller – God. But what does it mean to answer when divinely summoned? Now deceased Vanderbilt Divinity School professor of homiletics David Buttrick’s essay, “A Fearful Pulpit, A Wayward Land,” stops short of carping criticism of what passes for acceptable preaching of late. Instead it cites reasons



why preaching remains useful in any age. The virtue of preaching, claims Buttrick, is not whether it is biblically sweeping or theologically profound but that it “names God” into human consciousness in places of theological contestation and human misery. Naming God is the work of called preachers. It is countercultural work because to do so is to decidedly declare that the historical landscape is open and that God is alive, active, and accessible in our wayward land despite all evidence to the contrary.

If the God whom we hurriedly coax others to programmatically applaud by means of antiphonal assent “is good all the time, and all the time good,” then the preacher who speaks this claim is under compulsion to name what is good about God in an untidy and deathly world. Not only does the preacher have to grapple with the theodicy problem, asking what it means to trust the future when bad things happen in our world. She must ask of the caller, “In ways must I speak to get a loving and just God off the hook in the face of human tragedy and collective misery?” And then after assessing her listener’s felt needs ask, “Is there a word of promise that I can render at this particular moment for the particular people I am authorized to address?” This is what it means for preachers to live into their questions.

The preacher’s vocation in language is scandalous work because he cannot ignore facts which daily remind him that the social environments from which he takes his personhood are religiously and politically poisoned. For the preacher, at the heart of her vocation is the work of helping her listeners to critically examine the merits of their deeply embedded faith claims and see if they hold up in an everchanging society. Therefore, consequently, the most valuable gift a good theological education can offer a student is the receipt of academic scaffolding that supports theologically grounded philosophical inquiry. If you find after having matriculated through your degree program that you have exhausted your questions; have not developed basic competencies in scriptural exegesis, historical, philosophical, and constructive articulation of doctrinal and theological traditions; and have not obtained a critical and socially conscious understanding of the cultural realities that shape the Church and society, I am sad to say that one of two things has happened: “We have failed you or you have squandered a rare privilege.” If we have failed you, you will fail us and inevitably wound the faith of the people entrusted to your spiritual care. Answering when divinely summoned is crucial in these perilous times because such times offer disciplined religious leaders willing to unite heart and mind a unique opportunity to help remake the world.

Preaching helps remake the world. It is one means God uses to inject hope into a society of theological confusion and technological distraction. Preaching in response to God’s call is faithfully declaring what God intends and can accomplish in our world. Preachers are frontline keepers of faith articulating the promises of God to churching, un-churching, and religiously disaffected persons—promises that come in the form of forgiveness, mercy, grace, and even rebuke. Nothing bears more importance in this learning environment than for our students to acquire skills and resources for aiding people to live into their questions. This means resisting the urge to turn to trite, overused, even if well meaning clichés that speak of the goodness of a God one refuses to name.



Howard University School of Divinity

www.divinity.howard.edu



@HUSDIVINITY

www.divinity.howard.edu

WHAT A WORD

WHEN CHRISTMAS IS A JOURNEY OF FAITH: FOLLOWING THE STAR WHEN IT ISN'T THERE (Matt. 2:1-15 NRSV)



When you think about the “wise men” who came to pay homage to Jesus as “King of the Jews,” what do you think was the most important aspect of their journey to and from the place of Jesus’ birth? I ask this question, because I suspect that most of us have missed a critical reason for their journey. The things we highlight when telling the story of their visit – while obvious – may well miss the boat. I submit that in spite of all we know and accept as part of the saga of the “wise men,” it was their faith that drove them – that enabled them to persevere throughout their long journey – that made them receptive to the promptings from God.

I believe the primary reason that faith was the driving force that first activated them – and then sustained their commitment to their long journey – can be found in the role the “star” plays in this story. The star caused them to begin their quest – “For we observed his star at its rising...” This star – an astral phenomenon that astronomers still have a tough time understanding – became the catalyst that motivated these “wise men” – Magi – to initiate their quest to meet the new “king.” The logistics challenges should have stopped them before they started, because they needed vital supplies and support for themselves and their entourage.

They had to cover as much as a thousand miles with no workable maps and only the memory of a special star – a star that was no longer shining. That star – the phenomenon that started this whole journey – was no longer visible. They would not see it again until after they reached Jerusalem. Still, they stepped out and persevered solely through their faith that they had made the right decisions in their quest – their search – for the “King of the Jews.”

For all intents and purposes, they were wandering in the dark – covering totally alien terrain, crossing barren deserts, traversing uncharted wilderness – knowing only that somewhere out there – somewhere beyond what their eyes could see – was the object of their quest. Somewhere out there they would find the “King” and be able to honor him in the most devoted fashion they could conceive. That took faith – the kind of faith the writer of Hebrews described when he wrote – “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Their faith was rewarded, because one day, after their long, long journey, they looked up and saw Jerusalem – where they expected to find the “King” they were seeking.

- They had stepped out on faith – alerted by that “star in the east.”
- They had maintained their faith – persevering through the deserts and wilderness they had encountered en route.
- They had held on and had pressed forward – sustained by their expectations and anticipation of worshipping the newly born “King of the Jews.”

For all intents and purposes, they were wandering in the dark – covering totally alien terrain, crossing barren deserts, traversing uncharted wilderness – knowing only that somewhere out there – somewhere beyond what their eyes could see – was the object of their quest.

WHEN CHRISTMAS IS A JOURNEY OF FAITH: (cont...)

Somewhere out there they would find the “King” and be able to honor him in the most devoted fashion they could conceive. That took faith – the kind of faith the writer of Hebrews described when he wrote – “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Their faith was rewarded, because one day, after their long, long journey, they looked up and saw Jerusalem – where they expected to find the “King” they were seeking.

- They had stepped out on faith – alerted by that “star in the east.”
- They had maintained their faith – persevering through the deserts and wilderness they had encountered en route.
- They had held on and had pressed forward – sustained by their expectations and anticipation of worshipping the newly born “King of the Jews.”

But they were in for a surprise. He was not there – not where they had expected to find him; but they didn’t give up. As they set out again – now toward Bethlehem – they got the surprise of their lives. That unique star – reappeared. This time, it didn’t just alert them. This time, it led them directly to the house where the young child was living. So, they finally arrived and gave him the gifts they had brought with them.

- Gold – fitting for honoring a King.
- Frankincense – a proper tool for a priest to employ when worshipping God.
- Myrrh – the right spice to prepare a body for the grave – presaging the death, burial, and resurrection of the soon to be King of Kings.

Their perseverance had been rewarded, and they returned home rejoicing all the way. They could rejoice because their **CHRISTMAS JOURNEY HAD BEEN AN ACT OF FAITH.**

ANSWERING THE CALL, HONORING OUR QUESTIONS (cont...)

To truly answer God’s summons is to risk naming, evenhandedly, places displaying ineffable grace and holiness that is God—often found in a minister’s worship, praise, and justice acts—and the reality of God’s inscrutability, in moments of crisis and catastrophe. Naming God signals fully formed faith that has found its home in the called person’s deep searching. Naming God is to answer God. It is helping others to live into their questions. For from our questions we come to know that we are helped and known in our not knowing fully God’s plan for our lives. Preachers are question-raising pilgrims carrying sacred promises—promises that are only as good as a preacher’s serious wrestling to live into them. As called ones, yours is the work of helping others to respect your theological wrestling and see the beauty and blemishes of your spiritual biography as you embrace your divine assignments.

Seminarians’ Day evidences some of the preparatory work of prospective graduates who have answered their call and are living into the questions that accompany it. The words of a dear friend, colleague, and mentor of mine who departed this life a year ago after a short battle with a rare form of cancer come to mind. Dale would say to his students: “I have more questions than answers, more problems than solutions and from these gifts, I give God





Want To Contribute?

The Weekly Word is a weekly publication of the Howard University School of Divinity published under the direction of Rev. Paula Hall, Manager of Media and Communications. The Weekly Word is published each Wednesday during the academic year. The deadline for weekly publication is each Friday. Written contributions by Faculty, Students, Staff, and Alumni are welcomed. For submissions or questions, contact: george.duncan@bison.howard.edu (703.565.8101).