

“Ready for Easter?”

I.

No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are always welcome here.

We say that a lot around here. Last week, we said it twice. I hope you aren’t sick of hearing it yet, because we certainly aren’t sick of saying it. I don’t suspect that we will be anytime soon. But it is one thing to repeat some slogan. It is another thing entirely to live it—to practice the kind of radical hospitality that really can welcome whoever may happen to walk in our door.

Because you never know. Our text for today suggests that, when the Easter God is on the loose, anything can happen.

The question for us is simply this: are we ready?

II.

The Rev. Dr. William S. Hicks—“Saul” to his friends—usually needs no introduction.¹ As senior pastor of the Solid Rock Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he preaches in person, every Sunday morning, to a flock of 10,000, and to millions more through the congregation’s television and radio broadcasts. As a founding figure of the Christian Coalition, he has advised Presidents, counseled congressional leaders and made countless appearances on *Larry King Live*.

But just lately, Dr. Hicks has grown apprehensive about the state of our nation; he has watched, anxiously, as the forces of wickedness gained a foothold right here in the heartland. On Sunday, April the fifth, 2009—the first Sunday after the Iowa State Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of marriage equality—Dr. Hicks told his congregation, in a solemn tone, that dark days had come for all who love the Lord. He said (in his best pulpit voice) that, in the face of such an egregious injustice, good people could no longer stand idly by. So he pledged himself, his congregation, and all his vast media empire to work without ceasing until the state of Iowa should be brought back to its senses; until traditional marriage was upheld in the Hawkeye state.

The reaction in Iowa was both swift and predictable. The Unitarians rolled their eyes. Many of the Methodists did not know what to think. And conservative leaders from the Missouri to the Mississippi rejoiced to have such a champion. He started making frequent trips to the state, speaking at rallies and appearing at press conferences alongside Chuck Hurley and Bryan English from the Iowa Family Policy Center. He became a regular guest on Jan Michelson and Steve Deace’s radio programs. Before long, he established his place as the *de facto* leader of the “pro-marriage” movement in Iowa.

And then...he took it up a notch.

In the early months of 2010, The Rev. Dr. William S. Hicks caused quite a stir. Although (he said) he preferred to stay above the fray of partisan politics, desperate times call for desperate measures, so he announced his intention to endorse a candidate in the race for Governor. The media was all atwitter, speculating endlessly and breathlessly: which candidate would it be? Would his endorsement effectively end the race? What did all of this mean? Where is David Yepsen when we need him? An entire state waited with bated breath.

But Iowa ended up waiting a long, long time.

A funny thing happened to the Rev. Dr. William S. Hicks on the way to make his much-anticipated endorsement: he fell and hit his head. In a men's room in the Memphis airport, as he waited to change planes, a freshly-mopped floor brought the big man down. Although he briefly lost consciousness, and although paramedics were summoned to the scene, he managed to catch his connecting flight and arrived in Des Moines on time.

But he just did not feel like himself. He canceled the press conference, refused to return phone calls from his friends and, after consulting with a local physician, he checked himself into Methodist Hospital. He presented perplexing symptoms: no appetite, no energy and some unusual issues with his eyesight. (He said something about "scales"). Test after test was ordered, but nothing proved conclusive. The doctors scratched their heads.

Three days after he had arrived in town, a small group of medical students from Des Moines University was accompanying a doctor on rounds. One of those students—a young woman named Anna—recognized Dr. Hicks right away. She whispered swiftly to her friend, "This is the guy. This is the guy who came all of this way to impose his religion on the rest of us, the guy who thinks we should write discrimination into the state constitution. I hate this guy."

Or, at least, she thought she hated him. But as the doctor quizzed them about his symptoms, her mind began to wander. She found herself starting to feel kind of sorry for this strange, sad man, stuck here in a hospital room so far from his home. And all the rest of that day, she kept recalling a line from one of her favorite novelists, Graham Greene, something about how, when you look at someone carefully, you can not help but feel pity, because you can always see the Image of God within them.²

Pity brought her back to that hospital room when her shift had ended –pity and some nagging sense that this was the right thing to do. It felt painfully awkward. They spoke, at first, of superficial things –of the weather, and Sooner football. (She had a cousin at the University of Oklahoma). But as the shadows lengthened, and they settled in, something strange began to happen: he started to open up; to share some of the confusion and doubts that had dogged him these last three days. And when he finally trailed off into an embarrassed silence, wondering if maybe he had said too much, she was surprised to hear herself say, "You know, Saul, if you plan on staying in town for awhile, maybe you would like to visit *my* church some time. I think maybe you would like it."

And that is how the Rev. Dr. William S. Hicks found himself in the third pew from the front, pulpit side, for the 11 o'clock Sunday morning service at Plymouth Church. People tried very hard not to stare. (Mostly they failed). They whispered about him in Waveland Hall at the coffee hour: he applauded enthusiastically for the KinderChoir, someone said. I thought he was glaring at the lesbian couple in his pew, said another. Call me crazy, said a third, but I think he really listened to the sermon. And someone else said they saw him talking, at length, with one of the deacons after the service.

After that Sunday, things got weird. Without any public statement, he resigned his pulpit in Tulsa, sold almost all of his stuff and moved into a little house on Cottage Grove. He started showing up most Sundays at Plymouth, went through the Discover Plymouth New Member class, even nominated himself for the Board of Christian Social Action. When he volunteered to carry the Plymouth Church banner in the Pride Parade, some said this was getting a little ridiculous. Some said this had gone too far.

But all the while, there he sat, almost every Sunday morning, three pews from the front on the pulpit side. And every single time, he heard someone say: *No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are always welcome here.*

I guess he must have believed that. I guess Saul took us at our word.

III.

It isn't just a slogan. It is a question, one that we should always be asking ourselves: are we prepared to welcome whoever will walk through our door? Or, to put it another way, are we ready for Easter?³

You see, Easter isn't over. It never is, because Easter isn't a one-time thing; Easter is an ever-repeating event. Easter *happens* -over and over and over again. Every time the Risen One comes barging into someone's life to highjack it for the purpose of God, Easter occurs. So long as the wild and reckless God of the Gospel is on the loose, any day might be Easter Day.

We have to stay on our toes. It is not up to us to decide when or where or how it will take place. We can never control the Easter event; we cannot make it happen or manage it once it does.⁴ All that we can do—all God ever asks us to do—is get ready for Easter to happen.

Because it *will* happen. Just ask Ananias. There he is, minding his own business, in the workaday world of Damascus, when the Easter God suddenly shows up and whispers this crazy idea in his ear. Saul is on the way, "*breathing out threats and murder,*" with a warrant in his hand to round up all the Christians and toss them in the clink. But the Spirit suggests that God has got some other plans for Saul: "*I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*" Saul will never be the same. It is about to be Easter again.

But only if Ananias plays along. This altogether minor disciple—a man we have never heard of before and will never hear from again—this minor disciple has a major role. He has to go to Saul, has to lay his hands on this man, has to call him his “brother.” That is how Easter will happen for Saul. Ananias cannot make it happen, but God does not intend to have it happen without Ananias.

Of course, the story is so significant because Saul becomes Paul –apostle to the Gentiles, tireless missionary, author of 2/3rds the New Testament. But all of that begins—all of that can only begin—when Ananias embraces him, when the church in Damascus baptizes him, when the first generation Christians welcome him at their table -no matter who he is, no matter where he is on life’s journey.⁵

They knew the part they had to play. They were ready for Easter.

Are we?

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Notes

¹ This section of the sermon is my attempt at what Charles H. Cosgrove and W. Dow Edgerton call “incarnational translation,” that is, “translation that renders the form and content of the text in functionally equivalent contemporary terms.” *In Other Words: Incarnational Translation for Preaching*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p.xi. This book is required for my first year of coursework in the Association of Chicago Theological Schools Doctor of Ministry program. Obviously, my incarnational translation is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead—except for certain public figures—is sheerly coincidental.

² This is the line she was trying to remember: “When you visualized a man or woman carefully, you could always begin to feel pity— that was a quality God’s image carried with it.” Graham Greene, *The Power and The Glory*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1990), p.131.

³ I started to think of this as an Easter story after reading Beverly Roberts Gaventa’s notes in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1993), pp.2074-2075.

⁴ “Conversion, change of the radical kind worked in Saul is something Christ does, not something we do.” William H. Willimon. *Acts*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p.78. Emphasis in original.

⁵ The story of Saul on the Damascus Road is often portrayed as a private experience. But by including verses 7-20 in the reading, the lectionary draw our attention to what Charles Campbell calls the wider “ecclesial context” of the story. Sauk’s conversion is not complete until it culminates in the church –in baptism and (perhaps) Eucharistic eating. When it comes to conversion, it takes a church. See the Campbell’s treatment in *The Lectionary*

Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts. The First readings: The Old Testament and Acts. Roger E. Van Harn, Editor. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.559-562.