



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, *Associate Rector for Formation & Liturgy*

Holy Graffiti

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 26, 2020

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on 1 Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Let us pray.

God of terror and joy, you arise to shake the earth. Open our graves and give us back the past; so that all that has been buried may be freed and forgiven, and our lives may return to you, through Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

Almost exactly twelve years ago, in late July 2008, Lin-Manuel Miranda was preparing for a beach vacation when he picked up a copy of Ron Chernow's biography of Alexander Hamilton at what was then a Borders in the Time Warner Center on Columbus Circle. A few days later, Miranda and his now wife jetted off to Mexico, where he spent most of his time ensconced in Chernow's book. Fairly quickly, he saw in Alexander Hamilton a "young, scrappy and hungry" immigrant—a brilliant, ambitious and deeply flawed character perfectly suited for the rapidly paced, verbally jam-packed genre of hip-hop. After returning to New York, Miranda reached out to Chernow and asked him to serve as a historical consultant on a concept album focused on Hamilton's life. It was essential, Miranda believed, to treat the past with the respect it deserved. "I want historians to take this seriously," he said. Chernow accepted Miranda's offer, and over the next few years he provided Miranda with regular guidance on what eventually became a megahit Broadway musical.²

One day, as the musical was still developing, Chernow received an invitation to see a workshop of the first act. Despite all of the time he had put in to helping Miranda reach this point, Chernow was not prepared at all for what he would see. He knew *Hamilton* would be a hip-hop musical and yet he had always assumed that the actors playing the Founding Fathers would be white. But over the course of an hour or so that afternoon, an older white man who had spent his life researching and writing about white men from long ago witnessed a young, mostly black and Latino cast bring America's early days to life. The uniqueness of the scene shocked him. The show was what Miranda and his collaborator Tommy Kail later called "a story about America then, told by America now."³

When the film version of *Hamilton* arrived a few weeks ago on Disney Plus, we as a country were in the midst of an intense self-examination of our relationship to our past. In the weeks following George Floyd's murder, statues in dozens of American cities were taken down or destroyed because their subjects were slaveholders, defended the Confederacy, or participated in massacres of indigenous people. As city boards voted to remove certain statues and protesters toppled others, some were relieved that public art glorifying subjugation and violence had been removed, while others worried about attempts to forget or re-write history. Even Miranda's musical got caught up in the debate when critics pointed out that the work did not fully grapple with Hamilton's own relationship to slavery. Over and over again, Americans

¹ Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*.

² Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 32-33.

³ *Ibid.*

asked one another, in a variety of ways: “Should we treat the past with reverence, excusing its faults because we dare not judge it according to the standards of our own time, or should we treat the past with disdain, drawing attention to the many harmful effects it caused—effects that continue to this day?”

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I felt prepared for such a debate because the questions our country was asking itself were quite similar to the questions that members of the Church have long been asking one another: Is our mission as a community of faith to change with the times and listen to what God is saying to us now or is our mission to preserve a legacy that has persisted, unbroken, for centuries upon centuries? In many ways, the Church is indeed a bastion of tradition. Where else in modern America can you regularly hear music that was written hundreds of years ago and recite words that have been around for two millennia? Our unofficial motto is often, “that’s the way we’ve always done things.” But, in truth, the Church has changed considerably over the years. We may cherish our Book of Common Prayer, yet it has only existed in its current state for more or less forty years. Many of the hymns we love have only been sung for a hundred and fifty years or so. Go back four hundred years before that and the entire liturgy would have been chanted by priests in Latin. We are devoted to the past, yes, but we cling, more than we typically realize, to idealized, romanticized, highly selective versions of the past; we prize only what we like and value about history—not the totality of what actually happened.

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And this tendency, Jesus tells us, is not necessarily a bad thing. “Every scribe,” he says, “who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” The divine historian, Jesus claims—the one who bears witness to the presence and priorities of God—intentionally blends together the new and the old. To view the past through the lens of the present is not to blasphemously defame it; to view the past through the lens of the present is to do precisely what Jesus asks us to do. In Jesus’ thought world, the values and insights of the present constitute the yeast by which the loaf of the past is leavened.

The whole of Scripture, in fact, depicts a God who is constantly blending old and new together, serving up a sacred mixtape of the already and not yet. “Within God’s spirit,” Mel Bringle writes, “the past and future mingle into one.”⁴ Indeed, the most significant event in Christian history—Jesus’ resurrection from the dead—is also an encounter between the old and the new. Jesus’ reappearance after his death serves as both a restoration and a transformation, simultaneously as a return to what was previously true and as an embrace of what has never been true before. Jesus comes back to be with us again and yet, from that time forward, nothing is ever the same. To see Jesus’ resurrection solely as a reversion to the past is to profoundly miss the point. Similarly, when we remain stuck in our perspective of the past and reject out of hand new ways of understanding it, we risk closing our hearts to the transformations God is seeking to enact in our time, to the future God is setting out before us now.

In recent weeks, Lin-Manuel Miranda has been surprised to hear from defenders of historical statues, who expect him to lend his support to the preservationist cause. But the person of color who gave life to the Founders on stage does not share a devotion to the Founders’ inanimate replicas. “If I cared about monuments,” Miranda explained, “I wouldn’t have written the show the way I did. I was never picturing the literal founders. I was picturing this story and the way I needed to tell the story was to write us into the story—to write a hip-hop and R&B musical that put [people of color] in the narrative and by doing so claimed some ownership [for them]—because we’re the ones who inherit [this story]; we’re the ones who are deciding what this country is going forward.”⁵ *The New York Times* movie critic A.O. Scott calls *Hamilton* “a kind of constructive vandalism, a rebuke that’s also a repurposing of the Founders’ legacy.” His fellow *Times* critic Wesley Morris, for his part, believes that *Hamilton* provides a compelling answer to

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⁴ “When Memory Fades and Recognition Falters,” https://hymnary.org/text/when_memory_fades_and_recognition_falter.
⁵ The Hamilcast: A Hamilton Podcast. “#226: Lin-Manuel Miranda Returns! // Part Two” <https://www.thehamilcast.com/226-lin-manuel-miranda-returns-part-two/>.

the question of “what to do about an ugly American history [to] whose highlights we tend to send valentines.” The show, he says, does to the story of the Founders what activists have done to the statue of Robert E. Lee on Richmond’s Monument Avenue—it “graffiti[s] the hell out of it.”⁶ The show, in other words, takes what is old and layers over it something new.

Lin-Manuel Miranda may not agree with me, but I find it hard not to see him as a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven, taking out of the treasure of his mind what is old and what is new. I find it hard not to see his musical *Hamilton* as a deeply prophetic work: one that implores us to reconsider accepted wisdom in light of new perspectives, one that challenges us to hear from a greater diversity of voices, one that inspires us to spray holy graffiti on the cherished sepulchers of our past. This month millions of us are encountering *Hamilton* again or for the first time. I hope that the parable of *Hamilton*, like the parables of our great teacher Jesus, will broaden our imaginations and help us look at the world around us in a new way.

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⁶ Stephanie Goodman, “Debating ‘Hamilton’ as It Shifts from Stage to Screen”
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/movies/hamilton-critics-lin-manuel-miranda.html>

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