

Epiphany in the Kin-dom

Isaiah 60:1–6; Matthew 2:1–11

O God of peace, who has taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, and that quietness and confidence shall be our strength: by the might of Thy Spirit, lift us to Thy presence, where we may be still and know that Thou art God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.¹

The visitors from the East were not kings. Matthew’s Gospel identifies them as magi—star-gazing, traveling gypsies. They were not kings, and this is important because this story in Matthew is about two other kings. Two very different kings.

Matthew is decidedly against a certain king—King Herod. Known as Herod the Great, he was a scheming, insecure, brutal man who put a hit out on a toddler. Let us not forget this is crucial to Matthew’s narrative.

In fact, Joy Carol Wallis, an Episcopalian priest and the wife of Jim Wallis, wrote an essay called “Let’s Keep Herod in Christmas” to remind us of the truth about Christmas and the Christian faith. Wallis wrote:

“Herod represents the evil of the world. He reminds us that Jesus didn’t enter a world of sparkly Christmas cards or a world of warm spiritual sentiment. Jesus enters a world of real pain, of serious dysfunction, a world of brokenness and political oppression.”²

Contrast King Herod with King Jesus. In Christ, God became flesh as a defenseless baby and entered a world as violent and disturbing as our own. Quoting Joy Carol Wallis once again, “Jesus was born an outcast, an unsheltered person, a refugee, and finally he became a victim to the powers that be.”

Given that King Jesus stands in stark contrast to King Herod, I believe that instead of discussing a kingdom, we should advance the concept of kin-dom, which refers to kin as relatives or tribes. King Jesus calls us into a community that is not defined as a rule of power but as a family of faith.

What does this kin-dom look like in practice? It’s relevant to know that the word kin shares the same lexical roots as kind and child. As the hymn puts it, “All

¹ Book of Common Prayer, “Prayer for Quiet Confidence”

² [Putting Herod back into Christmas - Liturgy](#)

children of the living God are surely kin to me.” This kinship should overcome barriers and boundaries that typically divide us.

I think about Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Ford was a Republican, and Carter was a Democrat; Ford was from urban Michigan and Carter from rural Georgia. What an unlikely friendship! Once political rivals, these men bonded over their concern to help the less fortunate.

In his posthumous eulogy for Jimmy Carter, Jerry Ford wrote, “Distances have a way of vanishing when measured in values, rather than miles.”³ That is kinship that makes us family.

While Isaiah imagines all nations and peoples streaming to the light of God, such kinship rarely happens instantly and with such wide scope; it is more often a process or a journey, step by step and person by person. Relevant to note, then, that the magi did not take an Uber directly to King Jesus. Their guiding star was not a GPS system. This star rose and stopped, and all along the way, the magi had to keep up their conviction and hope. Measuring their journey in values, not miles, they bravely went forward.

Not only did a star guide the magi, but they also were gifted dreams. This dream interrupted their plans and caused them to go home another way, thus avoiding King Herod. One scholar referred to their dream as a “disruptive divine intrusion.”⁴

I admit that such “disruptive intrusions” in my life rarely seem like the work of the divine! I like my plans, not only because they are comfortable but also because they make me feel mature and wise. I like a sense of control.

Yet, people wiser than me say that, if you wish to make God laugh, tell God your plans!

I wish to add that I don’t believe divine love laughs at us or mocks us; rather, with the mystic Meister Eckhart, I say we “worship a God who laughs and plays.” Playing has a “disruptive intrusion” quality. Play has the potential to disrupt established plans and, in the process, unveil something profound.

I wonder if the magi had fun on their journey. I’m not naïve about their challenges, as I spent part of last summer traveling through the desert on my family’s camping trip to national parks. The RV we drove might be thought of as a mechanical

³ [Read former President Gerald Ford’s full eulogy for Jimmy Carter](#)

⁴ [An art of becoming? What about an art of being? - RUINS](#)

camel—it hauled our stuff, and it also had an ornery mind of its own. One memorable “disruptive intrusion” was when the air-conditioning stopped working in 120 degree temperatures!

However, other disruptions did prove to be more enjoyable, even God-moments. We happened upon a Native American drum and dance performance. We discovered a rock from which to jump in Lake Powell. After a particularly long day of hiking, we were stuck in a traffic jam in Yosemite National Park only to look out the window and find a gorgeous view of Bridalveil Falls. It was an epiphany.

Thinking specifically about our confirmation class this morning, I remember yet another journey—the mission trip last fall to Charlotte. We volunteered with nonprofit organizations, including with the Diaper Bank of North Carolina. The youth had fun packaging diapers and listening to pop music. In addition, we learned about poverty, particularly the fact that many of the Diaper Bank's clients work multiple jobs and still struggle to afford diapers, as these essential items are not covered by SNAP or other assistance programs. This was yet another epiphany.

It was also a disruption—an interruption of thought patterns and stereotypes. Youth and adults came away from this trip with fun memories and also a heightened empathy that we will carry forward on our journey. Once again recalling Ford and Carter, “Distances have a way of vanishing when measured in values, rather than miles.” King Jesus calls for the kin-dom—a family of relationships across boundaries and divisions that form bonds of empathy.

Here’s one more story to take on the journey of faith. Last week, I participated in a Zoom call with Church World Service in Durham, focusing on a program known as the Immigrant Solidarity Fund. Madison Burke, the presenter, noted that deportations are nothing new; the most deportations took place under the Obama Administration. However, the vitriol against immigrants has increased recently, particularly against Spanish speakers. How might King Jesus call us to change the conversation? Didn't this King say that whenever we welcome a stranger, we are also welcoming him?

After the meeting, I heard a story about a Guatemalan man who had fled gang violence in his country with his two young children after their mother had been killed by crossfire outside their home. He had made his way to North Carolina and found work as a landscaper. His favorite word in English is hummingbird. In Mayan culture, these winged jewels are believed to be messengers from the dead to the living. During this man’s first day on the job, a hummingbird rose directly

above his head and hovered there, shimmering like a tiny star. He believed that it was a guiding sign from his wife that he was in the right place. Can you imagine his plight? His hope? Distances have a way of vanishing when measured in values, rather than miles, and all children of the living God are surely kin to me.

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