

“We Have Seen His Star in the East: The Recovery of the Epiphany”

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My mother tells me that as a boy, I used to cry because I could not wait for Christmas to come. I dreamed of all those presents, all those glittering lights, all the great smells. I was swept up by the sense of anticipation that is at the heart of Christmas in North American culture. When Christmas Day finally arrived, however, I had a deep feeling of disappointment when the last present was opened. Even on those occasions when I had gotten almost every present that I had wanted, I still felt disappointment and letdown and depression. On the afternoon of Christmas Day, all that anticipation and hope and yearning suddenly yielded to a river of sadness in my heart.

Part of this was a natural human response—such a great sense of anticipation could not possibly be fulfilled. No matter what happened on Christmas Day, it could not fulfill the fantasies that had been nurtured in the waiting. As Peggy Lee sang in her striking hit twenty years ago, “Is that all there is?” Yet, the larger part of my boyhood response to Christmas Day came from the thorough commercialization of Christmas in our culture. In our society, Christmas is set aside as the engine that drives our economy, rather than a season for giving thanks to God for the mysterious and incredible gift of Incarnation.

Many retail stores count on the Christmas season to generate 40-50 percent of their annual sales, and the soaking of the culture with the need to purchase items for Christmas season, then, is seen not as a time to celebrate God’s work to redeem humanity in the birth of Jesus. It is seen as a time to redeem our culture through the purchase of products. We celebrate Christmas best in this culture by fulfilling the primary definition given to us by the culture: consumer. Sales are generated by tying together the great longing with the great lie. The great longing is that desire in our hearts for completion and fulfillment, for home, for love—the Christmas season speaks to that longing. In the Incarnation, we receive a stunning gift that is beyond our understanding: God comes among us, bringing us love and the promise of home. The culture speaks to that legitimate longing with the great lie: the longing can be satisfied through consumption, through the purchase of products, through presents given to our loved ones and friends, presents that assure them of our love. It is the great lie of Christmas in our culture, and it is a lie that has thoroughly commercialized a holy day.

On one level, this development should not be surprising, because Christmas as a holy season is rooted in a mixture of longing and lie. Constantine the Great, emperor of Rome, had great influence on the selection of December 25 as the celebration of the Incarnation.¹ That date was the chief day of the Roman celebration of the sun god, whom Constantine had dedicated himself prior to his conversion to Christianity. For him, the choice of December 25 was perfect marriage of his past and his present. Like all political powers, he had great confidence in his ability to order society and to keep things in their proper place. Like all religious institutions, the church had great confidence in its ability to keep secular and sacred in their proper places. When the secular and sacred intersected, as in Christmas, the church remained confident that it could tell which was which and that it could keep the sacred in authority. There is no

small amount of irony that many centuries later, in a nation that proclaims itself “under God,” one of the church’s most enthusiastic holy days is thoroughly taken over by the culture.

On another level, the church has sought to answer this perennial dilemma of longing and lie. We have sought to measure time not by a Roman calendar but by a liturgical calendar. We have sought to counter the inevitable influence of a Constantine on our people by lifting up a church measurement of time. The Christmas season is part of this. Liturgical seasons were born in the dialogue between the sacred and the secular. This dialogue should not be a cause for dismay—as Christians, we believe that the part of life that we call “secular” is simply a realm that has not yet recognized the reign of God. The task of the sacred is to proclaim this reign of God to the secular, and the hope is that the gulf between sacred and secular will shrink, with the secular becoming more and more “the place of God.”

In our time, and perhaps in every age, the distance between sacred and secular is shrinking. The distance is shrinking not because the sacred proclamation is so powerful. Rather, the distance is shrinking because the proclamation of the secular is so powerful. The longing of the human heart, answered so graciously by God in the Incarnation, has instead been answered powerfully by the lie of the culture. The Incarnation has been captured by the culture, as thoroughly as any slaveholders who turned to the Bible to justify their “owning” other human beings that they called “slaves.” Thus our dilemma in the church as we look at Advent and Christmas: how can we free ourselves enough from the lie of the culture to allow the true gift of the Incarnation to speak to our hearts?

Fortunately for us, the church has had to wrestle with this question in every age, and our struggles have produced a season that is connected to Advent and Christmas but which is largely ignored in the North American church. That season is Epiphany, and it offers to us an answer to the dilemma of the longing and the lie. It is a season well worth visiting as the preacher prepares for Advent and Christmas.

Epiphany is celebrated on January 6, and it begins a church season that lasts until Ash Wednesday. It is a season rooted deeply in the soil of the church, and it is older than the celebration of Christmas, its development as a church holy day and season is a result of a mixture of theological and political struggles. It is mentioned by Clement of Alexandria as early as 200 A.D.²

One of its roots is traced to gnosticism in Egypt. There the gnostics settled on the baptism of Jesus as the time when the divine spirit took over the humanity of Jesus. Thus, the name “Epiphany,” meaning “appearance of God” or “revelation of God.” These gnostic adherents borrowed the date of an Egyptian solstice festival, January 6, to celebrate the moment of divine appearance.³ The theme of light therefore permeates both Christmas and Epiphany.

In one of the great ironies of the church, the heresy of gnosticism failed, but one of its primary festivals, Epiphany, stayed and gained strength. By the fourth century, it joined Easter and Pentecost as the three major festivals of the church. Epiphany was so strong that January 6 was celebrated as both the birth and the baptism of Jesus. This joint celebration was separated as a result of the desire of the Roman political power to bring unity to the church in the fourth century. With a theological battle raging between Arius’ view that Christ was just a creature and Athanasius’ view that Christ was one substance with God, Constantine ordered the theologians to meet at Nicea to settle the issue. As a result, the view of Athanasius triumphed, and there was a need to separate the celebration of the birth of Jesus from the celebration of his baptism.

There was great resistance in the eastern wing of the church to the December 25 date for the birth, however, and a compromise was developed.

The celebration of the nativity of Jesus would begin on December 25 and would end on January 6, with the coming of the Magi to worship the baby Jesus. The baptism of Jesus would then be celebrated on the first Sunday following Epiphany.⁴ In this compromise, Epiphany lost both of its primary components: the birth and baptism of Jesus. Yet, its power remains because of its celebration of the revelation of God to all the world, as symbolized in the coming of the Gentile wise men to acknowledge the kingship of Jesus. For instance, England has long celebrated the twelve days of Christmas (December 25-January 6), culminating with the Twelfth Night, which Shakespeare took as a name for one of his plays. In many Hispanic countries, the Festival of the The Three Kings rivals our celebration of Christmas.

Epiphany, then, has a long and ragged history in the church. It has developed as a result of the dialogue between theological struggles and political manipulation. Rather than being seen as tarnished because of this dialogue, Epiphany offers great promise to us in our time precisely because it acknowledges a dialogue between God and the principalities and powers. Epiphany has come to be a celebration of God's revelation to all people and to all the world, including and especially the principalities and the powers. In order to see the power of this revelation, we will examine three of the primary biblical passages associated with Epiphany: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12.

Isaiah's prophecy comes in the midst of doom. As the people of Israel experience disaster, the prophet dares to proclaim that God's power is not defeated. There is emphasis here on the light in the darkness, showing us, and showing all, the way. It is a continuing theme in Isaiah (see Isaiah 9:2), and it is a dominant theme of Epiphany, since its date is based on an Egyptian solstice festival. The light of the star guides the Magi to the baby. The emphasis on the principalities and powers is seen in this Isaiah passage also, "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (vs. 3). Even as the nations rage, even as kings seek dominance over their people and over one another, a powerful light is shining to guide us in our confusion: the glory of the Lord. And, it is not an exclusive light—all will see it and follow it.

"We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." With these words in Matthew 2:2, the wise men announce their purpose to King Herod. If the theory is correct that these wise men are a priestly caste, familiar with kingly ways of Persia, then it is no surprise that these travelers report first to the king in Judea. They raise a troubling question for Herod, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Indeed, Matthew tells us that all Jerusalem is troubled by the question. Why? What is so troubling about this question?

Matthew must know how much we want to sentimentalize this story—to make a sweet baby, born in comfort, worshipped by all. God has come among us, and all is well. Matthew jerks us up out of seats, however. The response to the presence of God isn't adoration and obedience but rather trouble and violence. For all the sentimentality of Christmas, Epiphany provides an answer: the birth of Jesus brings trouble. Two themes run through this part of the story. First, the initial ones to worship this baby are outsiders, Gentiles who worship another god. There is an emphasis here that God's power brings these Magi into the fold. Secondly, the presence of God is troubling to God's people who, feeling that they have God safely encapsulated in a box, are stunned to hear that God can act without their permission or knowledge. The good news to the Gentiles is a challenge to God's people.

The principalities and powers who gather around the thrones of political entities are threatened by this appearance. The appearance challenges their claim to ultimacy, and the appearance demands that they acknowledge that they are subservient to God. The principalities and powers react in typical fashion—they strike out in violence, as the boys of Bethlehem are slaughtered. Although the church remembers this event at another time in the calendar, its presence must always be acknowledged in Epiphany.

Matthew beckons us back to the real world after the indulgences of Christmas in our culture. The gospel is for the world; not the sweet, nice world of the commercialized Christmas, but rather the harsh and violent world where tanks crush people and handguns kill people, where the comfortable crush the poor, where people who claim the name “white” refuse to acknowledge the power of racism. Matthew asserts that the gospel belongs in this kind of world, in the kind of world where boys are slaughtered in Bethlehem, girls are sold around the world as sex toys for tourists, in a world where the principalities and powers claim ultimate power.

It is a despairing view. We’d rather that the commercialized Christmas win, that Herod would change his mind, that there would be presents for everybody, that everyone’s desires could be met. Yet, Herod does slaughter the boys. It is the clearest statement of the world’s reaction to the presence of God. In the midst of the blood of Bethlehem, however, comes some stunning and unbelievable news: God does not give up on us. Matthew proclaims that God remains present and working in this crazy and chaotic world. The wise men follow a star, they listen to a dream. Joseph listens to his dreams and saves Jesus. Matthew lifts up the vision that is at the heart of Epiphany; nothing will stop God now. God has proclaimed solidarity with us in the birth of Jesus. Nothing will stop God now, not Herod’s slaughter, not Hitler’s slaughter, not the power of racism. It is stunning and unbelievable news, it causes the principalities and powers to tremble with troubles.

Out of this vision of hope in the midst of despair comes our call to join in the proclamation of Epiphany. Paul addresses that call in his letter to the Gentile churches around Ephesus. The epistle text for Epiphany (Ephesians 3:1-12) is a sweeping passage, with plenty of convoluted turns. The central emphasis for Epiphany is found in verse 10, “that through the church the manifold wisdom of God almighty now made known to the principalities and powers.” Here is a stunning and awesome call—the people of God are asked to be witnesses not just to individuals or groups or nations. The people of God are asked to be witnesses to the very principalities and powers that undergird the institutions of human history. (For a fine analysis of these powers, Walter Wink’s series on *The Powers* is required reading). These powers have claimed ultimacy over God, and we have believed their claims. They have taken the diverse colors of humanity and made them ultimate, leading to racism. They have taken the gift of sexuality and made it ultimate, leading to sexism and homophobia. They have taken God’s providential gifts of food and clothing and shelter and made them ultimate, leading to materialism. The list could go on, but the point is that the principalities and powers must hear God’s claims, just as we must hear them. And, most stunning of all, we are to be the community which proclaims to the principalities and powers.

Why must the church seek to break down the system of race and work for justice? Why must the church affirm the equal dignity of all humanity? Why must the church speak about the destructive consequences of materialism? Why doesn’t the church stick with individuals and family values? Because we are told by Ephesians and by

Epiphany that we are witnesses not just to individuals and families but to the principalities and powers also. We are called to proclaim that God is sovereign, that skin color, gender, economic status, and many other categories of human life are not ultimate. In their rightful place, they help us to celebrate God's gifts. In their idolatrous claim to ultimacy, they prevent human life.

Witness to the principalities and powers? You must be joking! It's hard enough to witness to my colleague at work; how can I speak to the principalities and powers? The gift of Epiphany is the answer to these questions. God's presence enabled a young teenaged girl to say "Yes" to God, even though she faced the label of promiscuous and pregnant teenager. God's presence enabled a man engaged to be married to this girl to say "Yes" to God, even though he broke the law and faced ridicule and self-doubt. God's presence enabled some traveling priests to outwit a king and save Jesus. The theme of possibility in the midst of the craziness of the world is at the heart of Epiphany.

This is what Epiphany offers us. Over against the themes of sweetness and innocence that our culture uses to sell products for the festival of the birth of Jesus, Epiphany stands knee-deep in realism. Epiphany begins in intrigue, and continues in slaughter. Epiphany reminds us that the church's story of the birth of Jesus is no sentimental tale where all believed and all lived happily ever after. It reminds us that Herod is troubled, that all Jerusalem is troubled, that the Magi must be clean as doves but wise as serpents, that Joseph must take his family and flee for their lives. That's the kind of world that surrounds the church's story of the birth of Jesus. It's the kind of world we know and experience. It is realistic about the possibilities of human progress.

Yet, Epiphany is also hopeful. In the midst of this kind of world, God isn't defeated. God stays with us, in the midst of all our chaos and failure. Epiphany is hopeful not because of human possibility but because of the depth of God's commitment to us. Yes, the world is a crazy place, but God asks us to love the world and to love one another as God loves the world and us. Yes, the world is unjust, but God asks us to join God working for justice. Yes, the principalities and powers seem overwhelming at times, but God asks us to join in the proclamation that they, too, are called to return to their rightful position in creation.

This combination of realism about human sin and hope in God's power is at the heart of the Epiphany season. It is a season that carries us for six or seven weeks in the church calendar, and it leads naturally into the next season—the season of Lent, the season of the cross, where we are asked to center upon our brokenness, but always remembering God's power and God's promise. The cross is our "NO!" to God, but in a stunning reversal, it is God's "YES!" to us. Epiphany carries us from the sentiment of Christmas to the difficult steps of Lent, reminding us of the power of our sinfulness but asking us also to trust in God's commitment to us. Like the Magi of old, let us, too, look for the star in the East, in the midst of the Herods and troubled capitol of the world.

NOTES

1. Bill Kellerman, "Epiphany: Light to the Powers," *Sojourners* (January, 1991): 26.
2. L.W. Cowrie and John Selwyn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974) 33.
3. Kellerman, "Epiphany: Light to the Powers" 26.
4. Ibid.