

A Reflection on the Meaning of Epiphany

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January 4th, 2012

Epiphany. I didn't grow up celebrating Epiphany. Maybe some of you didn't either.

The first time I actually celebrated Epiphany I was in Spain. Now the Spanish, they do it right. They know how to celebrate Epiphany, or as they call it: *El Día de los Reyes*. In 2007, I rang in the New Year on a 500-mile pilgrimage that spanned from St. Jean Pied de Port, a small city right on what I guess would be the French side of the Pyrenees Mountains, all the way to Santiago de Compostela, a large city in the North-Western corner of Spain.

On the 5th night of the trip, I was resting and journaling at a local hostel in the Basque region when I heard fireworks out in the streets. Unsure as to whether it was fireworks or gunshots (*I was new to Spanish culture*), I rushed to the window to find three men dressed up as "kings" walking down the road as families, mostly young children really, lined the street, applauding and singing. It was a parade of sorts. And just like those wise men in Matthew, the three men in Spain came bearing gifts of which they gave to the local children. Except, I'd guess the method of delivery in Spain was a bit different than that of 1st century Palestine. Now, I'm told the tradition involves leaving one's shoes, polished of course, outside open and ready to receive the gifts from the kings. However, observing from the window, it appeared the men were simply chucking piece after piece at the children. Like I said, either way, the Spanish do it right.

And so it was in this context that I first learned about the celebration of Epiphany. Since then, and after much study of course, I've learned that it's celebrated in a variety of ways within different Christian communities, but essentially it's Christendom's celebration of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles (non-Jews in the first century). The church in the East actually connects the holiday to the

Baptism of Jesus which we celebrate on Sunday, but across the board both Eastern and Western traditions aim to celebrate God's incarnation in the person of Jesus.

"Incarnation." It's a theological term (not to be confused with the flower, those are carnations. Though, I'm sure Ms. Kelly could inform us that the two are derivations of the Latin *carne* meaning flesh...). Where was I? Ah, yes, it's a theological term—incarnation. It's this idea within Christianity that God has come to earth, to humanity, within the person of Jesus. One verse in a paraphrase of John put it this way: And God put on flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.¹

And in truth, that's a central claim that distinguishes Christianity from other faith traditions. That Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian-Jew who lived 2,000 years ago was divine. Was the Jewish Messiah. The one hoped for, who brought good news (gospel), whose message was... well, we'll get to that.

So that's the classical framework, or traditional way of understanding Epiphany. Well, tonight I'd like to encourage us to think differently of this Epiphany moment. Instead of shedding light on Jesus' divinity, being God incarnate, I want us to think of this in terms of being a very political act.

You see, this claim of divinity was nothing new to the people of 1st century Judea. In fact, as some of my seniors will tell you, there was another character during the same era of Jesus who was said to be divine, "the beginning of life," "Son of God," "Savior" even. This character was also said to have "wiped away our sins" of the world, and whose birthday, like that of Jesus today, was to be celebrated as "good news" for all (*good news* coming from the Latin *evangelium*, where we get evangelism or evangelical). This character, VI Formers? Caesar. Yes. Caesar Augustus: Zeus Paternal; Father of the Fatherland; Most Divine Caesar; the common

¹ Peterson, Eugene H., THE MESSAGE: The Bible in Contemporary Language, NavPress: 2002.

good Fortune of all; Savior of the whole human race, or at least as was said about Caesar.²

Like Jesus, and before Jesus might I add, much of the language used to describe Caesar was language of divinity, language of incarnation. And like Caesar, much of the language used to describe Jesus was language of royalty, political language.

One of my favorite biblical scholars, Richard Horsley, has put together a fantastic book that looks deeply at both the language used to describe Caesar and the language used to describe Jesus, and what he concludes is that Jesus actually serves as a natural antithesis to Caesar. That is, he believes the early authors of the Gospels purposely borrowed language reserved for Caesar (both the political and the divine), in order to cast Jesus as a rebellious alternative, pitting the two characters against each other.

Why pit the two against each other you might be asking yourselves? Simply put, for many in 1st century Judea, Caesar was, well, less than divine.

You see, much of Caesar's praise had derived from his bringing stability to the Empire, by ending the Roman Civil Wars... *Pax Romana*, anyone? In that sense, it was said of Caesar that he had actually brought "Peace on Earth." However, one should take note that though Caesar certainly brought stability to the empire, it was only through military conquest that such "peace" had been reached. Peace for Rome then, was not the absence of war but a state in which all opponents could not resist. That was the salvation Caesar was said to have brought.³

Wrapping itself around the Mediterranean Sea, the Roman Empire destroyed, enslaved, and subjugated entire communities of people, all in the name of progress, civilization, stability, and peace. One can begin to imagine what the people of Judea,

² Horsley, Richard A., *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context*. Wipf and Stock Publishing: 2006. p. 26-7

³ Ibid.

those first listeners of our reading today, what they thought of Rome's vision of peace, as they themselves were an occupied people.

This occupation was most readily felt in a system of client-kings set up throughout the Empire, essentially puppet governments on the margins of the empire, constructed to maintain "order." And this is where we pick up in the reading today. We're introduced to King Herod, the Roman client-king of Judea and the surrounding area.

Now, as my seniors can attest, this guy was crazy. His job was to maintain law and order throughout Judea... Implementing and defending Roman interests, he created "a heavily repressive regime, replete with fortress, secret police, [and] informers..." He was paranoid as all get-out. Fearing that his two sons would take the throne, Herod actually had his two sons executed. When a soldier expressed reservation over the murder of Herod's sons, that soldier and his sons were tortured and executed along with another 300 disaffected soldiers. He infuriated the people of Judea by placing a Golden Eagle, a symbol of Rome, on the Jewish Temple, essentially claiming Rome's dominion over the people and their God. He engaged in massive building projects, taxing the inhabitants of the area to extreme measures to fund temples and monuments dedicated to Caesar. It was said that Herod's tyranny had "reduced the entire people to helpless poverty" as he bled his people dry. As a final display of Herod's insanity, I should share that before dying, Herod rounded up a number of distinguished men from each village in the country, imprisoned them and gave orders for their slaughter at his death, "so that all Judea and every household will weep for me, whether they will or not!"⁴ Again, this guy was crazy.

And this is where we pick up in the reading today. Our author begins, "In the time of King Herod after Jesus was born..." "In the time of King Herod after Jesus was born..." In light of who Herod was, what kind of memory might we expect this narrative to invoke for early Palestinian-Jewish listeners?

⁴ Ibid., p. 42-48

I'd argue the author is working to invoke a particular kind of memory. The same memory one might be appealing to in present-day Egypt if one began a story with, "In the time of Hosni Mubarak, there was Khaled Mohamed Saeed" Or, in present-day Saudi Arabia, if one began a story with, "In the time of King Abdullah, there was Manal al-Sharif" Or, going back in our own history, "In the time of Bull Connor, there was born Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X." Dare I say, "In the time of unfettered capitalism, there was born the Occupy Movement, the jobless, the bankrupted, and the foreclosed"? Quite a memory, no?

So, going back to our reading from Matthew, where is this Epiphany moment? I'd argue the Epiphany moment is in the subversive actions of the wise men.

Coming from the East, it's believed the wise men are high-ranking political and religious advisers to the neighboring empire. Their first words to Herod: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"⁵

It's no surprise Herod is so "frightened" at this question. These wise men come to the center of Roman power in Judea and ask the King where the child who's in charge can be found.

Imagine Mr. Roach going to the office of the president of Harvard University, and asking, "So, who's running this ship?" That's the power we're talking about here. It's subversive. It's rebellious. It's political. And that's only the beginning of the Epiphany moment.

Frightened, Herod sends the wise men to find Jesus, this peasant child who's now officially called Herod and Caesar's power into question. He tells the wise men, bring me word when you find him so I can go and pay homage... Think to yourselves for a second: If this is a guy who opted to kill his own two sons for fear that they would take his thrown, how serious is he about wanting to pay Jesus homage?

⁵ Matthew 2:2

Regardless, the wise men find Jesus and what do they do? How do they respond to this child who's been, as Cornel West so eloquently puts it, born between urine and feces, in, as anyone here whose family farms cattle will attest, a less than sterile feed trough surrounded by the stink and stench of animal life?

Rather than demand any sort of worship, they pay this child homage, they pay him honor. They, socially and economically privileged characters, publicly display their allegiance to this child, born in less than an acceptable situation to unwed parents (yes it was as socially frowned upon then as it seems to be now).

So, again, what is this Epiphany moment? When faced with the two contrasting visions of the future – the way of Rome or the way of the peasants of Judea; the way of military might or the way of complete domination; the way of oppressive and dominating power or the way of a defeated, subjugated, and powerless people– the wise men chose the latter. It's in their aligning themselves, despite their privilege, with a community distraught by violence and oppression, with a world plagued by domination and enslavement.

We live in a world in which millions are without food. We live in a world teetering on ecological destruction. We live in a world in which one's sexual orientation determines their acceptance within or exclusion from particular communities and families. We live in a world still plagued by racial, sexist, and religious bigotry. We live in a world plagued by extreme poverty. We live in a world in which millions are displaced by various military conflicts, sometimes carried out, as Martin King readily acknowledged in his *Beyond Vietnam* speech, carried out by my own government.⁶ We live in a nation in which the political process is dominated by an oligarchic class, where it is legally permissible for pharmaceutical corporations to

⁶ King Jr., Martin Luther, *Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence*, April 4, 1967. Accessed via: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>

hold chronically ill children hostage and at the same time receive billions of dollars in subsidies.⁷

Between “wealth inequality, escalating poverty, obscene levels of unemployment... and abusive military and police power” let us not forget whom the wise men aligned themselves with.⁸

On our trips to Andrew’s Place and the Epiphany House, during our time in the pool with the children of Adaptive Aquatics program, I encourage you to think of ways in which you can, like the wise men, honor those around you, those on the outskirts of society. How can you honor the bodies and minds of those children who show up to the pool on Tuesdays? How can we conceive of ourselves as paying homage to those in the Middletown community who we tutor or mentor?

What if, like the wise men, we didn’t simply honor these people, but incorporated this spirit of dissent, of resistance to the injustices of empire? Would we simply bring food to these places? Or would we demand that there no longer be homeless. That there no longer be domestically abused?

I know it’s abrupt, but I’d like to finish tonight with a poem by Howard Thurman. It’s called *The Work of Christmas*:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
 to find the lost,
 to heal the broken,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the oppressed,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among all peoples,
 to make a little music in the heart...⁹

⁷ C-SPAN. *In Depth: Chris Hedges* Accessed via: <http://www.c-span.org/Events/In-Depth-with-Author-and-Journalist-Chris-Hedges/10737426679-1/>

⁸ West, Cornel. “A Love Supreme,” *The Occupied Wall Street Journal*. November 18, 2011.

⁹ Thurman, Howard. *The Mood of Christmas*. Friends United Press: 1973.