

Epiphany: Revealing the True Power of God

King of Glory Lutheran Church

Epiphany! Matthew 2:1-12

Pr Ruth Ann Loughry

This text is about power – King Herod and God incarnate in Jesus. The kind of power God brings is through what the Magi embody. Humility, obedience, worship. Herod rules with fear and insecurity. God in Jesus offers us power through vulnerability, humility, obedience and worship. Who or what do we allow to have power in our lives?

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' " 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

God be with you on this Epiphany day! Epiphany is moment in time and a season – the next six weeks - when we the Church celebrate the revelation, the showing forth of God in the Christ child. The magi through the leading of a star in the sky behold the birth of a new king and come from the East to worship. Next week, as Jesus' is baptized, God reveals the Son, the "beloved One."

Indeed, that is what Epiphany means. "Revelation! Showing forth! Manifestation! Appearing!"

As it says in Isaiah, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4 Lift up your eyes and look around;... 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice," (Isaiah 60:1-5 NRSV)

Holy, holy, holy! Glory, glory, glory! This is Epiphany! This morning as we go to our intergenerational Epiphany hour, we can make stars and revel in the glory of this day!

Yet...as we listen to Matthew tell the story...Epiphany isn't just glory and celebration. It is full of fear and power manipulation as well. Actually there weren't three kings in the story. There were only two. King Herod and Baby King Jesus; one of them ruled by fear and one ruled with humility, obedience and love.

Because of the Christmas carols and Nativity scenes, tradition portrays three magi. Yet what we know of these early pagan astrologers, they would have travelled in large caravans; men and women alike. "They were held in high esteem in the Greco-Roman world as astrology had become popular through the 'science' of the East." (The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament. Craig S. Keener. InterVarsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois. Pg 49)

So it was highly likely that many residents had seen these caravans enter Jerusalem ... or at the very least, the gossip chain quickly spread the news. When Herod heard there was a new king, his ego was challenged. Herod - who himself sponsored pagan temples in Gentile cities - would have taken the Magi's appearance as a threat. He was scared he might be unseated. Would he lose his place? Where was his power now? As goes the demeanor of a leader, so go the emotions of the people. Herod and all of Jerusalem were filled with terrifying fear.

As we enter 2020, you and I see multiple nations questioning the power and authority of those in leadership at home and abroad. With over 12 million acres burned in Australia, people are clamoring for the government to lead and discuss climate change. In Hong Kong, protests for full democracy and police investigations continue to rock the city. Some Iraqis mourn the death of Soleimani while others celebrate because he had cracked down on pro-democracy demonstrations. (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50995792?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.com/news/world&link_location=live-reporting-story)

Power like fire is dangerous. Not to be played with but honored. Now - just as in Herod's time, authoritarian leaders rule with fear and insecurity while just leaders rule with mercy and transparency.

God's power; one of mercy and love, moved these Gentile, pagan sky gazers to travel for years following a star. God's power moved them to find the Christ child and prostrate themselves in worship. God's power was revealed in their vulnerability, humility and obedience.

You see there were only two kings. But One King was revealing the trajectory of His rule. Even as a two or three year old child when they arrived, the Magi recognized in Jesus a God for all people. He was God who welcomed all who bow in true and humble worship. Jesus was God who honored obedience born out of love not fear. He was God who allowed humans freedom not demanding submission and conformity without question.

As much as I love Disney movies, they always seem to get this power play right. In the recent remake of the movie Lion King, the kindness and mercy of King Mufasa only serves to highlight his ruthless brother Scar who desires to take over the kingdom. Scar uses all means, including murdering his own brother, to accomplish his end game. In the meantime, young Simba, son of Mufasa, is coerced to believe through lies and deception that he is responsible for his father's death. It leads him astray for many years. He is afraid to embrace his rightful place on the throne even though he has a heart like his father, Mufasa, full of kindness and light. He will rule with righteous supremacy.

Power is a powerful thing.

To whom do we offer our allegiance and power? Listen carefully. Power isn't power until it is recognized as such. Power doesn't have sway until there are people who back it up and believe in it and allow themselves to stand under it. Even when we don't understand it, or question it, or feel coerced ourselves, we often give into power needlessly. Finally as Alice Walker says, 'The way most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.' (<https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/power.html>)

Remember Ghandi? He stood up to power and began a movement of non-violence. Remember Mother Teresa? She stood up to authority and cared for the poor. Remember yourself....what have you already done or what is God calling you to do?

Matthew's Epiphany story tells us once again that God's power is the only true sovereignty. There is no manipulation. God alone could call men and women from the far East to worship Jesus who had never heard of Israel's God before! God's power is the way of humility, obedience, justice and mercy. God coming to earth in the form of a baby shows us the vulnerability of God to enter into our human story so that we might understand true power.

God grants us power when we pray and receive strength for our troubles. God's influence comes to us as we are able to forgive those who have wronged us. God's dominance is in the pages of God's word to relieve our stress, guide our ways and love our neighbor! What will be manifested, what will be shown forth when we humble ourselves and come under God's rule?

Turning the other cheek? Praying for enemies? Loving those who are different from ourselves? There is true power...from the authority of Jesus Himself. Each and every one of us has access to this strength through God who offers it freely. We can come without fear to worship the Christ Child! Listen again, we come without fear to worship the Christ child!

It is in our humility and obedience, our worship and love of God that we gain access to Almighty God's influence and authority in our lives. Under Jesus' gentle rule, we find the peace that passes understanding. We find the ability to love beyond what we thought we could. God grants the capacity and potential to change our situations and God's world.

What revelations! What manifestations of God will come as we bow down to worship God who has ultimate say over our lives. In humble obedience we worship. Holy, holy, holy! Glory, glory, glory to God Almighty!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I invite us this week to reflect upon who or what we authorize to have dominion, influence, authority, and control in our lives. We might be surprised by what we discover – both positive and negative.

And as we ponder these power plays in our lives, may we offer them as gifts before Jesus to be transformed into worship, humility, obedience and love. If God called the Gentiles, the unbelievers to the Christ child, God can certainly handle all our confessions as well! Let us prostrate ourselves before the Almighty and watch with amazement at what God will do!

Blessed Epiphany to you! May God's power be made perfect in your hearts.
Amen.