

Epiphany — Alejandra Ahern

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Ancient Greeks believed that the fact human beings told stories was the defining characteristic that set them apart from any other species. I have had a deep love for stories for as long as I can remember. Regardless of what is happening in our lives, we can turn to familiar stories to comfort us during turbulent times.

Stories compel us to do more and be more. Nothing quite captivates us like a good story. The best stories, some say, are the ones that teach us something about ourselves—both our shortcomings and whom we aspire to be. According to some, the tales that do this best are the ones that concern great kingdoms and kings, epics where the fate of the world is at stake.

Naturally, when I was given the opportunity to preach, I wanted to use my time to digest one of many compelling biblical stories. Our Gospel passage today provides us with a narrative of the early part of Jesus' life. As we have learned throughout the Advent season and Christmastime, the way in which our Savior enters our world is deeply revealing. God uses this opportunity to foreshadow some of the lessons his son will teach us in the future.

Kings

Our passages today are saturated with kings of every kind. Kings are a very familiar concept in our culture despite our democracy's inherent lack of them. We think of kings as valiant warriors that come in to save the day. Sometimes we are reminded of the corruption many kings face during their reign. Regardless, we all acknowledge kings are people of power and privilege. With this power comes great responsibility. Biblical scholars call today's psalm a royal psalm, a passage that would most likely be read upon a king's coronation ceremony. The text describes what a king guided by God's hand should aspire to be.

Upon reading this, it is natural to ponder Israel's history for a moment. Israel has had a bad history with its kings. God did not intend for the people to be ruled by an earthly king. However, the people begged for it; all of the other nations were doing it. In short, the Israelites wanted to fit in. Even when Israel's kings began their reigns well, they often fell into patterns of worldliness soon after. Saul began his reign wisely but lost favor with God. Even David, one of the most beloved kings in history, a man after God's own heart, fell short of expectations. With this narrative, one may wonder if anything is to be done. Can a king be fair? Can a king truly look after the poor? Can a king really fight for God's purposes alone? For that to happen the world must be turned upside down.

Isaiah speaks to this kind of world in our Old Testament passage. One of the major prophets of old begins to describe a world in which kings could exist like this. He asks the people to lift up their eyes, to watch for the moment that is on the horizon. He describes hearts swelling with joy, something the often oppressed Israelites yearn for. God fills an emptiness inside of us that makes room for an unspeakable joy.

In the midst of our Gospel tale, there are two central rulers. The current order has Herod in power. However, we all can feel the world is about to change. Jesus is just a young child but even hearing about the prospect makes Herod shiver. The Message describes Herod as *terrified*. How can a king in power be terrified of a child? He is like many people in power today. Certain individuals have the gift of captivating and bring a people group together. With a united and convinced people, it is much harder to play the role of oppressor. Herod knows that, under the right conditions, this child could strip away his grip on the people. If we read past the boundaries of our Gospel passage we see what a terrified king can do. Herod goes on to massacre the sons of Bethlehem, turning Jesus, Mary, and Joseph into refugees in Egypt.

Herod rejects what God has to offer, and in doing so rejects God himself.

Yet, if you remember, there were two kings in this narrative. Jesus Christ, Son of God, embodies the characteristics of the ideal king we read about in our psalm. After we determined no man could faithfully comply with the divine requirements placed on a king—God sends us a man who can. Jesus rules in a way few could have expected. Many imagined a great warrior of royal blood, one that would command armies and overthrow Israel's oppressors. Jesus comes in a humble form and takes on issues in unexpected ways. He comes in a form that is approachable, and embodies who God has been trying to advocate for the whole time. Maybe now the people will begin to understand whom God's heart breaks for.

In acknowledging Jesus as a perfect king, we face a dilemma. We are a people of the in-between time. Jesus has come and left us an abstract set of instructions on how we are to conduct ourselves until he returns.

In his commentary on the passage Drew Bunting begins to describe our situation, "In the monarchic period of Israel, the psalm challenged only the king. In a democracy, it challenges every citizen. In the body of Christ, it challenges every member."

These texts call us to transform ourselves into Christ-like leaders. In doing so we will find ourselves seeking him more and more. After all, no one has been able to do it except him. Why not seek his example? In order to do this well, we have to possess some awareness of what God's Kingdom entails. Thankfully we find this in our passages as well.

Kingdom with Gentiles

Traditionally God's Kingdom has included primarily his chosen people—the Israelites. However, even this is challenged as we embrace God's desires. In our Old Testament passage, Isaiah chooses to mention the Gentiles twice. Gentile is almost a dirty word for the ancient Jews. As God's chosen people they look at the Gentiles as less than, and misguided. Why bring them into this precious moment? Isaiah is speaking of a radical change that is going to take place in the future, a future in which the world will be turned upside down. In this world, a king like the one described in the Psalter is able to exist.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he discusses the same mystery Isaiah alluded to in his text. While describing the purpose of the mystery Paul address these Gentiles Jews have been so

uncomfortable with in the past. Around verse six of the text, Eugene Peterson phrases Paul's message in a striking way. *The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.*

In our Gospel text, Gentiles take the central role as they interact with a worldly and a divine king. The Magi, or Wise Men, offer us an interesting insight into God's plan for the world. They also offer a glimpse of ourselves. The Magi are faced with a decision in our text. They can either continue with the norm, and worship the tyrant that is currently occupying the throne, or they can embrace the new. We face this decision constantly in our daily lives—even after Christ the King has been born. We are surrounded by those in power who do things and say things our Christian hearts warn us against. We have to actively choose those who gain their authority from God rather than from empire. The Gospel text leaves the experience of the Magi vague, but it must have been a powerful one. After all, they ended up leaving to return to their home countries by another road. Their experience was so moving they were able to resist the temptation to return to the norm, and embrace God wherever they could find him.

It is also notable that they appear in Matthew's account. Traditionally, Matthew has been described, out of the Gospel authors, to be most concerned with the Jewish audience. In contrast, Luke is often referred to as the voice directed at Gentile audiences. However, Luke's account skips across this story. Matthew felt the need to include this story that has become so deeply ingrained in our Christian tradition.

Jesus knows outsiders because he has been one. He was condemned to die on a cross because of it. He was turned into a refugee when he should have been welcomed with open arms. Who could better understand the plight of the forsaken than he? Thus, in order to embody Christ-like leadership, we will find that we have to be stretched. We will find ourselves in places and in the company of people we did not expect. However, throughout this process, we will find ourselves with deeper feelings of contentment and joy than we could have imagined, even in the face of adversity.

God welcomes everyone, "even those who have been traveling on radically different paths on their search for their true home." In fact, I would argue, especially those—and if our God does so why shouldn't we follow his example?

The most significant stories in our lives are the ones with layers. They are the ones that reveal new nuances each time we explore them. Some would even say the best ones cause us to experience epiphanies. God's story has all of the makings of a great one. In fact, it is probably the greatest one of all. It is one we can live into with our whole being and be blessed by. Living into this strange kingdom and pronouncing Christ as our sovereign King and Savior takes diligence. Luckily we find ourselves surrounded by others seeking. And God meets us in the middle.

Thanks be to God.