

Epiphany Paradoxes

January 3, 2010
Matthew 2:1-21

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“Epiphany” is the day on the church calendar, January 6, which follows the last of “the twelve days of Christmas” (which began on December 25.) As the Christmas season evolved in the West, Christmas commemorates the good news of the Incarnation and Nativity of Jesus (God becoming human and taking flesh among us, in Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary) while Epiphany commemorates the good news of God’s love revealed in Christ for all the world and all the peoples—not just the Jews, the biological family of Jesus.

Some of you are probably “done” with the Christmas season and ready to move ahead into 2010. I don’t blame you—but there is this loose end remaining from Christmas. So God has come among us in Jesus. “Silent Night, Holy Night...” But what difference does it make? And what do we do about Him?

The second chapter of Matthew is full of contrasts and paradoxes. The light shone in the darkness. The wise men from the east (most likely astrologers from Persia, today Iran) voyaged for months or years, all the way to Jerusalem, to worship “the Child” with their very costly gifts. They are strangers, outsiders to the covenant—hardly very worthy first arrivals. Learned, wealthy experts, worshipping a peasant child.

The “insiders,” the religious experts, knew the right answer in response to the question of the wise men (“where was the Christ to be born?”) but neither they nor King Herod could be bothered to go two hours outside of Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, to investigate for themselves Whom they were seeking. (Although if they had, Herod would simply have tried to kill the little child Jesus, because that’s exactly what he tried to do when he did find out more.) Another paradox: the same birth and life, the same Christ, brings joy and elicits worship from the wise men—while eliciting mass murder from a hyperjealous and insecure Herod. Joy and peace, terror and massacre. It was into such a world that God chose to risk being born. And human history hasn’t changed much—loving adults showering innocent children with gifts, and petty tyrants or sophisticated military forces massacring them across wide swaths of the globe.

How do we respond to God’s plan to become a helpless child in such a dangerous world? Do you believe God has invaded human history in order to influence it, change it, fulfill it—or that history is pretty much “one [darned]

thing after another” mindlessly, randomly repeating itself, “to the victors go the spoils,” without any particular purpose or hope?

How we understand a birth can affect how we understand life. Most of us Baby Boomers knew George Carlin, and to know George Carlin was to know his scathing wit and irreverent humor. How tragic, that even toward the end of his life in June, 2008 he could never replace his deeply held cynicism (to which he clung as tightly as any religious fundamentalist clings to faith) with any broader sense of purpose or hope.

He recounted in an interview the story of his birth—the story his mom had shared with him. His dad was a successful businessman in New York City and his mom was secretary to the publisher of one of the top fashion magazines. They were married for three years and then divorced, childless. A few years later, in a chance encounter, their paths crossed on a Manhattan sidewalk. Carlin’s father was evidently quite a charmer; he invited his ex-wife to get together for a fun weekend at the beach in Far Rockaway, Queens. Who knows what she was thinking, but she agreed. (What he was thinking appears obvious.) They got together, alright, and baby George Carlin was the result. He says it wasn’t supposed to happen—it was only a chance encounter.

Several weeks later she called his father to tell him she was pregnant. They went to get an abortion in Brooklyn. The father was reading the sports pages in the waiting room, and she looks up. She sees a painting, an impressionist or abstract painting—but in it she perceives the face of her mother. She studies it a while, leans over to her ex-husband, and tells him, “I can’t do this now. Let’s go.” That was it.

A person of faith might see something of providence involved in his birth—maybe even the merciful if inscrutable hand of God at work, or the Spirit prompting her in that waiting room—but the scene is straightforward to Carlin. He told of a random meeting that never should have been, a brief flashing of passions leading a confused woman considering an accidental rorschach on a waiting room wall to make the rash decision not to abort—and to bring George Carlin into the world.

Even just before he died in June, 2008, he could only construe life as random happenstance leading to nothing. “People ask me what I’ve showed up for...I tell them,

Man, I'm just here for the show. I'm just here for the show." (Never mind whether such an outlook—"it all boils down to entertainment"—is a worthwhile exchange for 71 years of life on this earth. There's something in his no-nonsense, no-disappointment approach which appeals to a lot of people; it seems needlessly sad to me. It's the worldview which comes from Herod's refusal to admit there might be a God in charge, and it leads to emptiness and cynicism, if not much worse.)

In contrast to Carlin's birth, Charles Rush writes of a conversation he began with a kindly couple in their late 70's he met at a family gathering. "Do you mind if I ask how you two met?" "The first time or the second time?" they asked. "The first," he requested; they had plenty of time to kill.

It was during World War II, at a dance given by the RAF in England. The man was being deployed to France early the next day, and he was there by himself. She had come to see her brother, a British fighter pilot. They talked, they danced, it was time to say good-bye. He offered to walk her home, but she lived six miles away. Plus, she had her bicycle; "Thank you, anyway."

She must have been something; that guy asked if he could run along next to her! She says yes. All six miles, he's thinking about heading out to battle tomorrow, maybe never to return, and he's only kissed one girl in his whole life. They finally arrive at her farm in the English countryside. They talk about a little of everything, and he decides to risk it. He tells her he's leaving the next morning for battle and he can't believe his good fortune—she took his breath away the moment he laid eyes on her at the dance, and now this—now he's with her. He decides to kiss her on the spot. She decides not to mind. They didn't get much sleep before he had to run back the six miles to the base in time to arrive to be shipped out at 6:00 a.m.

He mailed her letters from everywhere he went, but she never got any. (He had her address wrong.) She thinks about him all the time, but of course concludes he's lost interest or moved on or maybe even died...Then many months later, she's in London visiting relatives. Amid a swirling crowd of uniformed young men she sees one soldier drop his backpack, run toward her, and lay a big hug and kiss on her. She begins to cry, not believing she would ever see him again. But he was very much alive. They got away, walking the streets of London hand-in-hand all night long. He told her of all the letters he had written and sent to her and how tired he was of all the battles, and how when he had gotten afraid he kept going because the one thing he wanted more than anything in the world was to find her again...

So it happened. A great passion, a great romance, a great hope. (Hard to imagine they or their children would ever believe it's all just random happenstance, and the whole point of life is the entertainment value.) We may see the Epiphany scene in the same light—a great hope and a great love, anyway—I hope we do—but most slices of life, and even this one of the life of young Jesus, are a bit of both contrast and paradox.

[You heard Kip explain to the children that Luke's scene of the baby Jesus in the manger, the animals, the angels singing and the visit by shepherds to the barn is entirely distinct from our scene from Matthew, in which the young Jesus is now living in a house—without, evidently, manger or oxen or donkeys.]

The Light of the world born into the darkness of Herod's mania. The Word of God into the defiant silence. The wealth of the gold, frankincense and myrrh, against the bare simplicity of the house. The humility of the wise men, following the star God provided them and eventually worshiping even the young child. (To their credit, they did not turn back when the star settled over such a modest scene. After all they had been through, they were now supposed to make a big fuss over a toddler in a dingy studio apartment no better than thousands they had already passed en route?...but they did so gladly; "they were overcome with joy"! How marvelous, and how unusual: when God's plan did not coincide with what they had expected, they did not complain or pout. Whatever their expectations may have been, "They worshiped the child.")

God led them to Herod, and Herod summoned the Bible scholars in Jerusalem. They knew the Scriptures, and quoted the Scriptures. But they had no eyes to see or heart to follow where, or obey Whom, the Scriptures directed. They knew the facts of the matter, but had lost interest. They memorized the minutia but couldn't be bothered to look for the One to whom the whole of Scripture had been pointing.

There was nothing compelling in the star or in the fact of the birth of Jesus: the wise men adored Him and the scholars ignored Him. Herod wanted to kill Him, and just for good measure had his soldiers murder every young child in the area whom he thought might possibly be Jesus.

With God there is no compelling us, no forcing us. There is often paradox. (God believes in George Carlin and every one of us whether we believe in God or not. God gave even Herod a chance: God brought the wise men, men of stature and repute whom Herod granted an audience—God brought them a long way to Herod,

so that Herod received the same gold-plated invitation to worship Jesus which the wise men and you and I also received.) Whatever our birth, our upbringing, our parents, our story; whether accidental and trivial, or epic and romantic—we may still choose to trust that God has taken the risk of invading this dangerous planet in Jesus. Herod was here. Pilate was here. The crowds shouting “Crucify Him, Crucify Him!” were here. The cross was here; Jesus got no “free pass.”

God has come to us to show us His love; to show us all is not merely happenstance and accident and “too bad” too soon. “For God so loved the world” He has come right into the worst of it. He has sent His only Son so that whomever will—Jew or Gentile, insider or outsider, male or female, young or old—may trust in Him, and by the power of the Holy Spirit walk with confidence all the way up to and then through the valley of the shadow of death.

God has believed in us; God has invested in us. God has come among us in Jesus: life is not mere happenstance. So our relationships matter, even when they are hard. Our decisions matter. Our personal private decisions matter (those we make when we think, or at least hope no one, maybe not even God, is watching). (Herod’s massacre reminds us that private decisions to ignore or oppose God do not remain private—one decision leads to another until the whole human race is reeling in pain and violence and revenge.) Our spiritual disciplines matter. Our soldiering on, doing the right thing, whether we feel like it or not matters. Our personal kindnesses to others matter. Our behaving responsibly as citizens on a shrinking planet matters. Our sense of humility, our gratitude before God, matters.

I can’t speak for anyone else, but as I get older and one year leads to the next and I look in the mirror and I look inward I become more and more aware of how little I bring to the party and how compromised I stand before God. I am more aware of God’s patience and mercy—for me and for Christ’s entire church. We are all compromised before God.

There’s said to be an old Mormon myth that Christ and Satan were observing humankind way back in our infancy. The human race was already getting off track, with ominous signs of delinquency in evidence even then. God asked each for a proposal: how should He deal with this race of humans, tending toward trouble?

Satan’s plan was simple. God has armies of warrior angels at the ready; why not assign an angel, with power to punish, to each human being? That should keep us in line. (Satan urged God to use force. God should keep us from annihilating ourselves, and keep our children safe at

all costs, regardless of our behavior. “Save us, O God—even if you have to force our safety upon us.”)

Jesus’s plan was more imaginative, and He gave us humans a lot of credit. (Satan probably mocked it.) “We don’t want to force them to do anything. Let’s give them free will, and let them go as they choose.” Jesus proposed to the Father something more, however: “Let me live and die as one of them, both as an example of how to live and to show them how much You care for them. The only answer to their delinquency is for them to realize that there is more mercy in You than there is sin in them.” [As told by William Sloan Coffin]

“The only answer to our delinquency is for us to realize there is more mercy in God than there is sin in us.”

Through Jesus the Christ we can begin to realize God’s mercy for us. We can begin to comprehend the peace of Christ which surpasses understanding—precisely because we live in a world which is not always peaceful. We understand the threats around us and the compromise within us—and we give thanks that God is near, and still wanting to restore each of us and use each one of us in spite of our fears and limitations and half-heartedness.

It is not mere chauvinism which believes that to love the child is good and to try to kill the child is evil; so we give thanks that all the nations will one day follow the example of the wise men and come to Jesus; we give thanks that every knee, like theirs, shall bow before Him and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen

Matthew 2:1-21

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.”

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘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.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.”

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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men...

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.