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## *The Problem with Power*

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*Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12*

The start of a New Year always brings with it the promise of new possibilities.

To say that *this year* is certainly an understatement, given the year through which we have just come. Surely 2021 will be better; yet, still the Covid pandemic rages on. The toll has been and will continue to be staggering, and we must not let down our guard. But with vaccines becoming more widely available in the months ahead, hope begins to flicker in this long, global tunnel of sickness, and despair, and death. Maybe we will be back together in person by the fall.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,” the ancient prophet said.

If only that light were more visible in other areas of concern we carry into this New Year – the need to awaken from our long, national nightmare of racial injustice; the need to dispel the shadows that have fallen across our stewardship of the earth; the need for the gloom of our cultural and political anger to lift.

“For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples,” Isaiah said. And we have a sense of what he might have meant.

“But the LORD will arise upon you, and God’s glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

January 6 is Epiphany for the Church: the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, the culmination of the season for many in Latin America, when *Los Reyes Magos* – the kings from the east – get to Bethlehem.

An epiphany is a disclosing of what was not previously known, an illumining moment when a new thing comes to light. For Christians, when the Magi arrive at the manger, the light of the Bethlehem star reveals that God’s love has come into the world once, and for all.

January 6 *this year* is also the day when both houses of Congress will gather to confirm the results of the presidential election. Not unlike what happens in the account of Herod and the Magi, we’ve been witnessing a struggle for power in recent weeks, and that struggle will play out this Wednesday in the halls of the Capitol – and perhaps in the streets of the city, as well. Can we hope for a national epiphany?

Pope Francis recently published a little book of Covid reflections titled *Let Us Dream*. In it he calls us to think anew of the worth and dignity of each individual, and our collective responsibility to

safeguard them. “Without the ‘we’ of a people,” Pope Francis says,

“Of a family, of institutions, of a society that transcends the ‘I’ of individual interests, life ... becomes a battle for supremacy between factions and interests.”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/01/the-guardian-view-on-liberal-christians-is-this-their-moment>)

The drama now taking place in our land among “we the people” reflects some of the problems with power that we see long ago in Jerusalem, in the story told in Matthew’s gospel.

The Magi from the east – who bear gifts as they “traverse afar” – figure prominently in our Christmas imaginations. We revel in our childhood memory of those three camel-riding, colorful characters. Who doesn’t like it when they take the stage in the pageant, decked out in altered bathrobes and bejeweled bicycle helmet-crowns, carrying little magical boxes and trinkets. It’s the culmination of the drama, the highlight of the story.

But there’s more to it. *A lot more.* This is one of the most telling narratives in scripture, and we often cut it off right when it takes a turn from the star-lit visit into the shadows of deceit, betrayal, and, finally, terrible violence. The Light may have come into the world, but that doesn’t mean all darkness has disappeared. On the contrary, the light makes it all the more visible.

Let's back up in the story to the characters making their way toward Jerusalem from the east. They're foreigners, Gentiles, non-Jews, Zoroastrian priests from Babylon or Syria, watching for signs in the stars. The Magi are people of influence and affluence. They can travel far from home, taking weeks to get to Bethlehem, bringing gifts of great value to Jesus: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Their wealth and status back in their homeland are their sources of significant power.

We don't know how many Magi there are, and they are *not* royalty, in spite of the claim of the popular Christmas carol we just sang. John Calvin, our 16<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian forebear, was adamant on this point: "The most ridiculous contrivance," he says, "Is that those men were kings."

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_Magi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi))

Calvin was right. Nothing in Matthew even hints at Magi with crowns, but the prophet Isaiah's words about "kings coming to the brightness of your dawn" bearing the three gifts, eventually give rise to the tradition of a troika of visitors from the east who were royalty. *In fact*, if they *had* been rulers from another land, Herod might have been more suspicious of them and they might have had trouble gaining access.

As it is, however, the Magi ride into Jerusalem and are promptly invited to the palace when they start asking around. Not everyone gets that treatment, but Herod sees the Magi as

powerful figures in their own right – more like peers than threats to his own position. When they meet together in the palace, this is privilege talking to privilege.

There's nothing inherently wrong with power; what matters is *how people gain it* – Is it by the consent of the governed or taken by treachery or force? – and *what they do with it* – Does it benefit others or merely those in power?

Herod is King of Judea. A Jew himself, he gains his place by military conquest of his own people. As a ruler representing the Roman Empire, Herod is both feared and respected. After all, he's the *actual* King of the Jews. To see the massive architectural achievements of Herod the Great, still visible 2000 years later, is to get a sense of the vast power of this earthly ruler to whom the Magi innocently go for information about the *new* King of the Jews, whose star they have seen from afar.

It's tough to call to mind a cast of characters meeting that day in Herod's palace that could be more at odds from those huddled in the stall in Bethlehem. The Magi and Herod and his courtiers, with plenty of food and drink, luxurious settees and thick rugs – all the trappings of power. Mary and Joseph, hunkered down with the animals, welcoming the lowly shepherds into the manger birthing-room, all the indicators of poverty.

The contrast is not merely a coincidence. Matthew wants the reader, *wants us*, to notice. It's central to the gospel as he tells it: the reign of God confronting the kingdoms of this world.

As the story unfolds, we watch power do what power almost always does: *it protects itself*. When those in power feel threatened by things they cannot control, they act to consolidate and defend their privilege, often going to extraordinary lengths to preserve what they have. In Herod's case, an autocrat senses a challenge from a competing claim to kingship, as reported by the Magi and Herod's advisors, and he hatches a plan to secure his rule, to protect his dominance.

He ascertains from the Magi where and when the new king has been born, ostensibly to go pay homage as they are doing. But he actually has something violent in mind. When the Magi do not return with specific information about where the child can be found, Herod is furious. In his rage he sends troops to Bethlehem and orders them to kill all children two years old and younger, in the hope of striking down the new baby king.

The Magi are warned in a dream of Herod's nefarious intentions, so they quickly leave town by a route that takes them home a different way, so as not to pass back through Jerusalem. The Magi are often seen as heroic in refusing to go back to Herod to give him what he wants, but, frankly, like Herod, they're also acting in their own self-interest. They have power and they, too, want to preserve it. Why don't they go warn Mary and Joseph? If they really were there to pay homage to the newborn Jesus, why would they not alert his parents of Herod's evil intentions toward their child?

When it comes to power, it's hard to get it right.

The Magi call to mind the liberal white pastors to whom Dr. King wrote his letter from the Birmingham jail. They talked a good game and said the right things, but weren't willing to put anything on the line when it came to real action. One moment, the Magi are "overwhelmed with joy," kneeling and paying the child homage, but the next, they leave abruptly. When their status is endangered, as they learn in the dream, without so much as a farewell warning to the parents, they slip out the back door and are gone, safely on their way.

That's the problem with power: it changes your perspective. When we have privilege that others don't have, it is exceedingly difficult to see things from their position. To do so threatens the essence of the particular power we have. The very notion of privilege assumes the need for an "other" over whom we exercise some degree of power - and it's hard to give it up.

"The cross is laid on every Christian," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*.

"The first Christ-suffering which every person must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world...When Christ calls a person, he bids them come and die."

Unlike the strangers from the east, Herod has no intention of worshipping the baby. But the Magi do. They visit the child and fall down before him. Yet when they brush up against the cost of

following Jesus, it compels them to flee. It's not unlike Peter's denial of Jesus after his arrest, when things get dangerous.

I wonder if things would have turned out differently for the families of Bethlehem if the Magi had sounded the alarm. Would the sound of Rachel weeping for her children still have been heard?

But that's not the direction the story takes. Instead, rather than run any risks, the Magi skip town as fast as possible – in effect, washing their hands of what happens next.

For the last several weeks we've been watching our own national drama of efforts to protect privilege. Unlike Herod's rule, *our* politics assume regular transitions in power. Electoral democracy depends on them being orderly. Our form of government rests on the bedrock tenet of majority rule, the consent of the governed. In democracy, transitions in power happen, and life goes on.

In an autocratic system, however, change does not come naturally or easily. Power rarely gives itself up without a fight. The point of power, in the view of some, is to hold onto it, no matter the cost. Herod understands that, and acts accordingly. The Magi aren't that far behind.

I don't mean to dampen our enthusiasm for the lovable pageant characters in their homemade crowns, but this story holds more than one epiphany. The light of the Bethlehem star reveals the

love and justice of God, but it also illumines the temptations any of us with privilege and power face in our lives.

The problem with power is that it so readily turns our humility to pride, and so subtly leads us to assume that the way we see the world is the way things are, and the way things should be. It's not easy to use power responsibly and to see privilege as an opportunity to serve.

The kind of power you and I are called to take up will not likely be found in the halls of government or with people of influence and affluence. The Bethlehem star leads us elsewhere, to one who will soon be a refugee with his family in a foreign land, one who now lies in a manger.

At the start of this New Year, our faith takes us there, to the place where love is born, a love that insists on the dignity of every human being, a love that pursues justice in the world, a love willing to give up power for the sake of others.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.