

The Epiphany
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The opening scene of the movie *Prince Caspian* from *The Chronicles of Narnia* shows a woman giving birth. The good news is that she delivers a healthy boy, who is an heir to the throne of his country. The bad news is that there is already a prince, the cousin of the newborn baby. The father of the newborn prince is King Miraz, Prince Caspian's uncle and guardian. There is only one thing standing between King Miraz's son and the throne: the life of Prince Caspian. So King Miraz immediately orders the death of Prince Caspian.

Fortunately for Prince Caspian there is someone in this dark story who is on his side. His tutor, an elderly professor, sneaks into Prince Caspian's room in the middle of the night at the news of the birth and helps him escape immediately. The professor knows well the ways of the world. Where there are rival heirs to the throne, there is one age-old solution—eliminate the competition.

Like the sinister uncle in *Prince Caspian*, King Herod knew a threat to the throne when he saw one. Herod was King of the Jews because he was first appointed a Governor, and later declared King by the Roman senate. He was Jewish not by birth, but by the conversion of his family. His

credentials were shaky at best. Herod would not have rejoiced at the arrival of the three Wise Men proclaiming the birth of a newborn King of the Jews. The announcement of the Wise Men would have been perceived as an unanticipated challenge to Herod's power. King Herod responded as many threatened rulers have. A kingdom isn't intended to have two kings, so he sought to eliminate the competition.

Fortunately for us there was someone in this very real conspiracy on the side of Jesus. That someone was God. In the Incarnation, God chose to use the power of life and death in the creation of life. God demonstrated authority not in "**power and great glory**," but in vulnerability. God chose to enter a relationship with us as a poor human child. Herod, in contrast, chose to use the power of life and death in the destruction of life. He demonstrated his authority in the Slaughter of the Innocents, the murder of all male Hebrew children age two and under, to rid himself of the threat of a rival king. Herod sought to establish his power by eliminating his vulnerability.

Epiphany, which means *to show or make manifest*, is the day on which we celebrate the revelation of God Incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is through the complementary forms of natural revelation in the star the Wise Men followed, and the special revelation given in the Hebrew Scriptures that

we learn of the birth of Jesus, the light of the world. As the Good News of Jesus' Incarnation continually unfolds we learn who responds to it and how.

In the reading from Isaiah we hear what Christians now interpret as preparation for Epiphany: **"Arise, shine; for your light has come...nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."** The first outside people to learn of the newborn King of the Jews, aside from the shepherds, are the Magi, who are also sometimes referred to as kings. "Magi" is a term that covered anyone from Persian astrologers, to interpreters of dreams and visions, to magicians—all with varying degrees of ability and integrity. Some had all the credibility of the local horoscope writer and others were highly respected for their knowledge of the stars. The Magi, Wise Men, or kings in this story are most noted for their responsiveness to a particular star. Though they were not Jewish, the Magi responded to the natural revelation of Jesus' birth and sought to worship him **"with exceedingly great joy."**

While the Wise Men were able to understand the meaning of the star, they were not able to find Jesus without more information. So they did the intelligent thing: they asked the Jews where they could find the newborn King of the Jews. It is only with the combination of natural and scriptural revelation that Jesus was found and worshiped. Thus both Jews and the

Gentiles were drawn together to discern where it was that God was leading them. Now we begin to see how more people respond the Good News of Jesus Christ. While the Magi proceeded to Bethlehem to find Jesus, the response of Herod and of “**all Jerusalem with him**” was to be **“frightened.”** We know Herod choose to respond with fear and violence. But why would anyone else be frightened?

If you recall Mary’s *Magnificat* when she learned she would be the mother of Jesus, it tells us a little about what to expect in God’s Kingdom:

**He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.**

**He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.**

This may be good news for the poor, but I’ll bet that the rich hear it differently. A priest I know has observed, **“Everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one’s in a hurry to get there.”** Perhaps it’s the same with the kingdom coming here. Vanderbilt Professor David Buttrick phrased the dilemma well in his book on Epiphany: **“Christ confronts us, threat and promise.”** The question for us is how will we respond?

The arrival of Jesus Christ promises to disrupt our lives as we know them. That can be a very scary thing, especially if we feel we have a lot to lose. It can also be a very exciting thing, if we can trust that God has a bigger vision of what life could be than we have. The more tightly we hold

on to what we have, the more we hear the threat. When the Magi came to Herod he did not hear Good News, so he immediately moved to protect himself and his power. The willingness of God to be vulnerable in Jesus invites us each to respond with our own openness. We do not know exactly where such risk might lead us any more than Mary, Joseph, or the Wise Men did. We only know that an invitation lies before us, an invitation to entrust ourselves to God again and again.

Amen