

Epiphany, Year C

- Who is God? What is God like?
- In a sense, that's the question for today, the feast of the Epiphany, this day when we really contemplate the implications of the Incarnation
- It's a difficult question to answer – oftentimes you'll hear people speak about God through analogy – God is like this, or the opposite: God isn't like that
- And our readings for today are a study in contrasts
- Especially if you continue past the reading of Matthew – and hear the story of Herod's slaughter of the innocents, the very next paragraph in the Gospel past the visitation of the Magi – that passage where Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus are forced to flee to Egypt because Herod kills every child in the region age two years old and younger, fearful of allowing the King whom the wise men predicted to live, since he might someday rival Herod for power
- The contrasts in these readings are between Herod and Paul, and the person of Jesus Christ who lies just at the background in our lections today – not a prominent player in any of these stories, exactly, but one whose very being informs everything about the way we think of them
- Contrasts between Herod's desire for and abuse of power as its own end, and the once-powerful Paul, who calls himself “a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles” and a “servant/slave” of the Gospel, between Herod's domination as an authoritarian ruler and Christ the ruler who is foretold to come as a shepherd for His people
- Contrasts between Herod's fear which leads to him slaughtering anyone whose claim to power might rival his own, even a whole generation of innocent children – and Christ, through whom we are made, as Paul says, “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel... in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.”
- Contrasts between the darkness of Herod's sins, the sins of those clutching at power, and the promise of God: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”
- Between Herod, fighting tooth and nail to retain what he thinks belongs to him – and God in Christ giving away all that God has, and all that God is, to all of us, who don't deserve it
- Beginning in a manger, twelve days ago – it's quite a stunning development, and one that I

feel like we as Christians still don't always manage to wrap our heads around – that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, first among all and firstborn of all creation, was made least and last of all by coming to us as a child, subject to worldly authorities – dependent upon more powerful people for everything from 1st birthday presents to his own continued existence

- Maybe if we could really get our heads around this, that this is the way God comes to us, it would be no surprise to later hear Jesus that whoever would be first must be last – he certainly practiced what he preached
- But we've talked plenty about Christ's infancy, the feast of the Epiphany isn't **merely** about the baby Jesus – we've just had twelve full days of contemplating that!
- So I love that on this day, the feast of the Epiphany, after twelve days of celebrating the beginning of the Incarnation, the moment God was made tiny flesh, we have this central, principal feast of the Church, dedicated to thinking about what that Incarnation really means – dedicated to understanding the revelation, the Epiphany that is the person of Christ – dedicated to thinking through how God really works, in Christ
- Historically, at least, the feast of the Epiphany was a commemoration of three different miracles, only one of which we – in the Western church – have tended to end up emphasizing
- That one is, of course, the coming of the magi, the wise men from the East who come following a star to offer gifts and pay homage to the newborn King of kings
- It's no wonder that it is from Matthew's Gospel, with its focus on discipleship, that we get this story of those who understand who Jesus Christ is and come to pay tribute – the first miracle of the Epiphany is about recognizing holiness
- But that's only the first of the three – thankfully, the other two are included as part of the Epiphany season, and so we'll get to hear more about them in coming weeks
- But they are two other rather significant celebrations, two other miracles that show us who Christ is, who our God is
- These two additional miracles are the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ at the hands of John the Baptist, now celebrated every year on the Sunday following the Epiphany; and Christ's first miracle, at the wedding at Cana
- And there are a number of ways to read these stories, a number of possible interpretations of them – but both stories, it's worth mentioning, show Jesus submitting or in service to others, despite his divinity
- But the simplest read on those different stories in light of this feast day we call the

Epiphany, in light of our contemplating what the Incarnation really truly means, is this:

- In the recognition of the magi, we see that Christ was made flesh and blood, to make even flesh and blood holy
- In His Baptism in the Jordan and in the wedding at Cana, Christ made use of mundane elements like water and wine, to make water and wine constitute flesh and blood; to make even water and wine holy
- So that in the flesh and blood and holiness of Christ all creation can be united, can be redeemed
- Our God works salvation, works resurrection, works miracles, with the most boring, most everyday of things
- Our God proclaims that He is present in the most unlikely of places – in a manger, in the needy and the sinful and the undeserving, in the helpless and the wounded, in water and bread and wine
- God's holiness, in other words, is everywhere and anywhere – that's what it means that God is always present, that Christ is with us always, even to the end of the age – means that God always shows up, even in places we wouldn't even imagine looking for divinity
- God's very being, divinity itself, is given out so freely that we can find God anywhere we look – that's what the Epiphany today is meant to be
- And once we realize how freely God gives of God's own self, how on earth could we ever want to be at all like Herod?
- When the divinity, the free gift of grace and mercy and love of God is just bursting out of even the commonplace and the lowly, why would we ever try to clutch at lesser things like power and influence – like money or control?
- But we all do; we are all a bit like Herod sometimes – clutching at power, trying to retain what's "ours", what we've fought for
- I have already, at many times in my life, become focused on exerting or grasping power, on being sure that I get my way, rather than trusting in God's providence, and I'm sure I will again at some point in the future
- But today we learn that no matter how hard we try or how much we struggle, no amount of clutching or grasping or clawing can bring us something greater than what we've all already been given, for free, regardless of what we deserve
- Forgiveness. Mercy. Acceptance. – Love.
- That is who our God is.