

Right-Side-Up in an Upside-Down World

Feast of the Epiphany

January 12, 2025

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. David's Episcopal Church, North Chesterfield,

VA

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Ephesians 3:1-12 (NRSV)

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12(NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ '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.'" ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today we find ourselves early in the liturgical year, when the gospel readings reflect the early times of Jesus' life and ministry. Last week you heard about the holy family's running away to Egypt to escape Herod. Today our readings are from the Feast of the Epiphany, which was this past Monday, January 6. As usual, we have to decode the churchspeak—"Epiphany" means "manifestation". Epiphany's full name is "The Manifestation of Christ to the

Gentiles.” The gospel reading is always the account of the wise men from the east—Gentiles, or non-Jews—to pay homage to the newborn Jesus.

The basic message of Epiphany is that Jesus is for everybody. God the Father sent his Son not just for Jewish people, but for every kind of person—for every person who ever lived. Jesus Christ isn’t just for people who are part of Western civilization—he’s for every person who has ever lived or will ever live on this planet. That includes us here this morning. So let’s look at our gospel reading and see what God in Christ has for us.

It starts out with the fact that Jesus was born **“in Bethlehem of Judea.”** We’ll come back to that in a minute. Then we meet the **“wise men from the East”** who follow a star to Jerusalem. You heard about them last Sunday. They’ve come to pay homage to someone who is **“born king of the Jews.”** Two things are important about the wise men and whom they are searching for. First, though over the centuries people decided there were three wise men and that they were kings, that’s not mentioned in the Bible. Second, and more important, is they’re looking for the one **“born king of the Jews.”** He’s not born to grow up to someday be king. Even now, as a baby, Jesus is king.

You might expect if these strangers show up in Jerusalem with news that there’s a new king that people might be excited or curious. But that’s not the response. To the contrary, **“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”** Why is he frightened? Because he’s the king. The Romans put *him* in charge. He’s been king for forty years, and he doesn’t want anyone else to be king. Herod was cruel and paranoid. He had executed several members of his own family because he felt threatened by them—including his wife. **“All Jerusalem”** was frightened because they didn’t know what kind of horrible things Herod might do when his power was threatened.

So Herod calls in the religious experts to find out where the **“Messiah”**—the anointed one of God, the Christ—was to be born. The answer is in Bethlehem. The experts prove it with a quote from the prophet Micah: **“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.”** (Micah 5:2) Jesus’ birth—the census, the trip to King David’s, and therefore Joseph’s hometown, no room at the inn, the manger—is fulfilling God’s eternal purpose for humanity foretold centuries before.

Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem after asking them when the star appeared—more about that in a minute. Off they go, they find the child and Mary and Joseph, and offer their gifts. But this story of the wise men ends on an ominous note: **“having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”**

It's ominous because of what follows. It turns out that Herod quizzed the wise men about the time they first saw the star so he could estimate Jesus's age—in order to kill him. Sure enough, Matthew goes on to tell us 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.”** (Matthew 2:16 NRSV) But the Lord had already warned Joseph in a dream, so he and Mary and Jesus had run away to Egypt to be safe.

The story of these Gentile wise men visiting Jesus isn't the only proof that Jesus is for everybody, including us. The fact that we are here this morning listening to it is ironclad proof. Herod is dead. The members of the Roman senate that gave him the title “King of Judea” in 37 B.C. are all dead. So are the wise men and millions of people, Jew and Gentile, who have heard their story over the last 2,000 years. The only person in the story who is still living is Jesus, even though in the story he's still a baby in the cradle. Jesus came for everybody in every age. But that doesn't mean he came so everybody could live what they feel are normal and contented lives and business could continue as usual.

Take Mary, Jesus' mother. She was engaged to be married, and probably looking forward to her wedding and a happy married life with Joseph. So were both their families. But God messed it all up by making her pregnant with Jesus, and all kinds of trouble and heartache followed, including the horrible death of her first-born Son.

Mary went along with God's messing up her life, but Herod wouldn't. When he heard there was a rival King coming on the scene, he tried to make sure he wouldn't be dethroned. He killed all the little boys in Jerusalem in the hope that he'd be killing Jesus too. Herod's overwhelming desire to keep things the same made him into a murderer.

But I think all of us to some degree would rather have things remain the same as always. It is true that some people are more adventurous and enjoy new and unexpected experiences more than others. But I think nobody wants

what they see as a catastrophic, world-ending event to intrude on their “normal” life.

For Mary, the mother of Jesus, her pregnancy must have turned her world upside down. Herod was afraid a rival king *would* turn his world upside down—so he took unspeakably cruel measures to keep it right-side-up.

But Jesus didn’t come into this world to keep things “normal” or on an even keel, or what we might describe as “right-side-up.” Not at all. In the 10th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we read Jesus’ instructions to his disciples before he sent them out to preach and heal and proclaim that the Kingdom of God had come in Jesus. Along with his instructions he told them what they could expect: **“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”** (Matthew 10:34-39 NRSV)

Jesus is describing how his disciples’ family members will react to his disciples giving up their lives to follow him. They won’t like it. Why? Because like Herod they’re afraid it will turn their world upside down. You may remember that in the Book of Acts Paul and Silas were attacked by a mob in Thessalonica who accused them of **“turning the world upside down”** by proclaiming that Jesus Christ was Lord of all human beings. The apostles’ message of Jesus threatened established order of society, and people found that profoundly threatening. This is just what Herod feared. The arrival of the absolute King of the Universe cancels every other ruler and authority.

The reality is that this world isn’t right-side-up—it’s upside down. Think about it. Here we are 2,100 years after the birth of Christ, and there is still unspeakable suffering in the world caused by unbridled human wickedness. This is what Jesus was born to correct. He came to die for the sins of those who put their trust in him. He came to give us glimpses of the perfection of the Kingdom of love and peace that he will bring in at the end of time. Those glimpses are seen when his people—you and me—repent of our self-will and self-

centeredness and allow him to fill us with his love and humility and care for others. His love and care are for everybody—even those who fiercely resist him.

Those glimpses are seen when rather than fighting the painful events in our lives we instead draw near to Jesus to ask him how he is using them to bring us and those around us closer to him. So let's draw near to Jesus and allow him to use us, so people can see what it is to be right-side-up in an upside-down world.

Let us pray.