

Epiphany and the Dark Side of Christmas

By [Rev. Bill Spanjer, Jr.](#)

For most of us, Christmas is a time of celebration with rich food and beautiful settings, a time of sentimentality and nostalgia. It is a time of singing and of joy. Historically the season of Christmas lasts for twelve days concluding on January 5th and punctuated by Epiphany on January 6th. Epiphany is the day that the church remembers the arrival of the magi to worship Jesus, the newborn king. This too, is a story that conjures up sentimentality as we remember the three star-gazing kings coming with their treasures to Bethlehem. In the history of the church, it is the time in which Christians celebrate the revelation of the gospel to the Gentiles, as these three magi were visitors from the East, Gentile lands, and as such were a sign of that which was to come when the gospel would be heralded among all the nations.

It is in this story however, that we are reminded of a very dark side of Christmas, a horrific side in fact. You will remember, that as the magi approach Bethlehem, they inquire with King Herod, regarding the location of the newborn king so that they might worship him. Herod, of course, is deceitfully intrigued by the notion of a new king in Israel, given the fact that he currently holds the title. He asks the magi to find the child and then return and let him know where he is so that he too may go and worship him. After attending to the child and gifting the family with the treasures that they brought, the three are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and they skirt out of town by another way. Herod, realizing that he had been double crossed, took matters into his own hands, and sent his troops to kill every child in the Bethlehem region under the age of two so as to ensure that they kill the would-be king. The night was one of horror around Bethlehem. Matthew uses the words of the prophet Jeremiah to describe it,

*A voice was heard in Ramah
weeping and loud lamentation.
Rachel weeping for her children
refusing to be comforted for they are no more (Matthew 2:18).*

As you know, Jesus' family escaped after being warned by the angel and they fled to Egypt until, in due time, Herod died.

It is in this horrific story that we are faced with an unavoidable facet of Christmas. Right from the beginning we see that there is a royal battle over the identity of the true king. Here, on Epiphany, we get the prelude to what would finally go down at Golgotha. Here we see the story of mankind, begun after the Fall in the Garden of Eden, finally reaching its climax. For, it was in the Garden that man was

tempted by Satan, not merely to eat forbidden fruit, but to throw off the royal authority of God and to grasp that authority for himself. In the Garden man did not merely commit an act of indiscretion, but as R.C. Sproul called it, “cosmic treason.” For the temptation from Satan was not one of food, but rather the offer to be God. It may not have initially looked like man’s intent in snatching the fruit was that sinister, but by time we get to Epiphany and finally to Golgotha, it is crystal clear. The reality is, as man we want to be king, master of our own destiny, and if God insists on filling that seat, then we will kill him if we can only get our hands on him.

This difficult and uncomfortable truth is crucial for us to acknowledge. It gives Christmas a context without which we are left with mere sentimentality. It is not just heart-warming that God became man, it is utterly essential. In the Garden, God said that the day we eat, we will surely die. That is, the day we sought to unseat God we would inhabit a world of inevitable death. This was not merely an act of judicial judgement by God, but one of natural consequence. Like a flower that decides it will sever itself from its roots should expect imminent death, so we as human beings who attempt to unseat God from His throne, a decision we make every time we sin, find ourselves in the same miserable situation.

The reality is, we need the true king rightly seated on his throne. We need God to unseat the tyrannical rule of Satan and his beastly allies and to restore godly order to His creation. We need a righteous king who can bring deliverance and somehow at the same time bring forgiveness to us, the cosmic insurrectionists. We need Jesus!

So, this Epiphany, we give thanks for the arrival of the true king, our King Richard come to reclaim his throne from the usurper Prince John. Let us reckon with the nature of the sin that made Christmas and ultimately Golgotha a necessity. And finally, let us remember the nature of the story we are in. In choosing to follow this king, we have chosen sides in an epic battle. The end of this battle has never been in doubt, for Christ has already achieved the victory. However, the enemy that once tempted us in the garden and who sought to derail the work of Jesus is like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Jesus said that the world hated him, and that it will hate us as well if we are truly his servants.

Let us live soberly then, putting on the full armor of God, denying ourselves, picking up our cross and following our crucified but risen King. May God keep us all faithful until the day He comes again.

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