



# KINGDOM EIPHANIES

## Epiphany & Parables

January 3, 2021

### PRE-SERMON READING | Proverbs 2:1-15

Good friends, take to heart what I'm telling you;  
collect my counsels and guard them with your life.  
Tune your ears to the world of Wisdom;  
set your heart on a life of Understanding.  
That's right—if you make Insight your priority,  
and won't take no for an answer,  
Searching for it like a prospector panning for gold,  
like an adventurer on a treasure hunt,  
Believe me, before you know it Fear-of-God will be yours;  
you'll have come upon the Knowledge of God.  
And here's why: God gives out Wisdom free,  
is plainspoken in Knowledge and Understanding.  
He's a rich mine of Common Sense for those who live well,  
a personal bodyguard to the candid and sincere.  
He keeps his eye on all who live honestly,  
and pays special attention to his loyally committed ones.  
So now you can pick out what's true and fair,  
find all the good trails!  
Lady Wisdom will be your close friend,  
and Brother Knowledge your pleasant companion.  
Good Sense will scout ahead for danger,  
Insight will keep an eye out for you.  
They'll keep you from making wrong turns,  
or following the bad directions  
Of those who are lost themselves  
and can't tell a trail from a tumbleweed,  
These losers who make a game of evil  
and throw parties to celebrate perversity,  
Traveling paths that go nowhere,  
wandering in a maze of detours and dead ends.

## INTRODUCTION | Epiphany

In some Christian circles, Christmas does not end on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December but continues through the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. This tradition that follows Christmas day is called Epiphany<sup>1</sup>, but you might know it by its more common name, *The 12 Days of Christmas*. Starting December 26<sup>th</sup> and concluding with a feast on January 6<sup>th</sup> called “Three Kings’ Day,” Epiphany celebrates the “manifestation,” or “appearance” of Christ as the Savior of the world. A celebration birthed from reflection on 2 Timothy 1:9-10,

This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the **appearing** [epiphany] of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Epiphany is commonly associated with [Matthew 2:1-12](#), which tells the story of the visitation of the Magi (or “wise men”), who were Gentiles, outsiders like us to the bloodline of Israel. These “three kings” were men of wisdom who were searching for understanding and knowledge. Coming from afar, they followed the light of the Christmas Star (much like the one we got to see this year!), which led them to Jesus. While we might suspect that finding a young child as the foretold wisdom of the world would, especially after such a costly and calculated search, compel laughter, doubt, or cynicism. Yet, these wise men worshiped. They demonstrated in their humble generosity before a humble King, the “Fear-of-God,” (that awe and wonder at the presence of God which [Isaiah describes](#) and whom it is said of Jesus, is [his delight](#)). That Fear-of-God which the proverb said would be the reward of their passionate and dedicated search for wisdom. This reward ensured them good and helpful company along the road of life, a prize we all admittedly desire.

Because of this critical chapter in the story of humanity’s salvation, the season of Epiphany pays special attention to the light of Christ, which “enlightens everyone” ([Jn. 1:4-5,9](#)) and leads all people to life—full and eternal—Jew and Gentile alike.

The Church has long viewed the Magi finding Jesus (thanks to the leading light of a star) as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 60:1–3, particularly verse 3, which reads,

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
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.  
***Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.***

Following the feast of “Three Kings’ Day” is Epiphanytide or the “Season after Epiphany,” after the first appearance of our Savior as the “light of humanity” (Jn. 1:4). It is a time to recall the Gospel story of Christ as the Light of the World—as wisdom, understanding, and knowledge of life to its fullest—for all peoples. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> The information on Epiphany is adapted from <https://anglicancompass.com/epiphany-and-epiphanytide-a-rookie-anglican-guide/>.

time in which the Church focuses on the revealing (enlightening, manifesting) nature of Jesus, and our part in the mission to reach all the peoples of the earth by reflecting his light—his wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. It is a season to celebrate what we have received and invite others to receive with us the great gift of God’s grace in the revealing of healing truth and wisdom to the world.

The wise men lead the way to the day of Epiphany. It is the wisdom of Christ manifest in the ordinary, earthy, humanity of Jesus: his life, actions, teachings, death, resurrection, and ascension—that sets the path forward and compels the invitation of many faith families from Epiphany’s feast to the feast of presentation on February 2<sup>nd</sup>.

While our faith family does not strictly follow any particular “church calendar,” we have over the last few years made it a habit to begin each year, setting our attention on the *Kingdom Epiphanies*. Starting each new year, contemplating and responding to the stories Jesus tells to help us experience an epiphany! Stories that reveal, enlightening us to the manifestation of the reality of God with us, God for us, God ruling and reigning to bring about his good purposes in and through us within the world as he puts an end to evil.

And it is this tradition that we take up once more today, focusing on the revealing of Jesus as the Savior of the world, as wisdom—life and the light of humanity—in his life, his teaching, his death, his resurrection, his ascension. He is the understanding and knowledge which gives shape to our lives and is for the benefit of the entire world—gentiles like us, outsiders, not quite holy insiders, the lost the lowly, the sick, the poor in spirit, and even those who don’t yet know they are in the list above.

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<sup>2</sup> the feast of the **Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ** [at the Temple] (AKA *Candlemas*) on **February 2** (40 days after Christmas, when, according to Leviticus 12:1–8, Mary would have to be ritually purified after childbirth). Some carry on with the season of Epiphany until *Ash Wednesday* and the beginning of *Lent*.

## PARABLES | In General

The stories Jesus tells have a more common name: *parable*. Parables, according to Klyn Snodgrass, “are stories with intent, analogies through which one is enabled to see truth...Parables are much more than illustration [about heaven]...[and though often prefaced with “The kingdom of God is like...] they are not about heaven. They are [instead] directed to life on this earth.”<sup>3</sup> Snodgrass contends that “The immediate aim of a parable is to be compellingly interesting, and in being interesting, it diverts attention and disarms. A parable’s ultimate aim is to awaken insight, stimulate the conscience, *and* move to act...Like prophets before him, Jesus told parables to prompt thinking and *stimulate response* in relation to God,”<sup>4</sup> and I’d add, one another.

Jesus began his ministry proclaiming the Kingdom of God: that God is with us and on our side—and he would spend his life helping us understand this kingdom, including how we can take up residence within, both by his lived example, but also through parables: everyday, earthy stories with intent that often pack a punch. Yet you’re not alone if you think that these supposedly simple stories and sayings are anything but clear in their revelation. First off, “Some of [Jesus’] parables are not stories; many are not agreeable [with our view of the world]; most are complex [contrary to popular opinion that all parables are straightforward]; and a good percentage of them,” argues Robert Capon, “produce more confusion than understanding.”<sup>5</sup> Wouldn’t you agree?

Capon goes on to point out what most of us have thought at one time or another as we’ve read the gospel stories, that,

“Jesus spoke in strange, bizarre, disturbing ways. He balked at almost no comparison, however irreverent or unrefined. Apparently, he found nothing odd about holding up, as a mirror to God’s ways, a mixed bag of questionable characters: an unjust judge, a savage king, a tipsy slave owner, an unfair employer, and even a man who gives help only to bona-fide pests. Furthermore, Jesus not only spoke in parables; he taught in parables, acted in parables, and regularly insisted that what he was proclaiming could not be set forth in any way other than in parables. He was practically an ambulatory [walking] parable in and of himself: he cursed fig-trees, walked on water, planted coins in fishes’ mouths, and for his final act, sailed up into a cloud.”<sup>6</sup>

But why? Why does the one who is “life, and the life is the light of humanity” (Jn. 1:4) communicate his enlightening truth through a form that often stumps us? That’s the question we need to answer this first Sunday morning of 2021, why does Jesus use what Soren Kierkegaard<sup>7</sup> called “indirect communication”? Communication intended to “deceive the hearer into truth”?

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<sup>3</sup> Klyn Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: a comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus*, 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgement: paradox, outrage, and vindication in the parables of Jesus*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Snodgrass, 8.

## PROGRESS TOWARDS PARABLES | In [Mark 1-3](#)

Perhaps it would be helpful to look at the development of Jesus' parabolic teaching, ministry, and life in the gospel of Mark. Mark's gospel jumps right into the season of Epiphany! He wastes no time with backstory. The calendar has turned, the appearance is manifest, and so he jumps right in. No detailed lineage, no foreshadowing monologue, no "how'd we get here" details of characters all too quickly forgotten. Instead, one simple introductory sentence, "The good news of Jesus Christ—the Message!—begins here..." with a reference for context, then wham: God's arrival, the action underway! John the baptizer, in step with the prophets of old, preparing us for the immediate entrance of Jesus into the story of salvation. Jesus baptized and affirmed. Jesus tested and proven. John silenced, Jesus, amplified. All in 15 verses!

Mark—via Peter—does what takes Matthew 65 verses and Luke 185 verses to accomplish. In fifteen short verses, God is right here with us, alive and at work in His story, in the story of humanity. The movement of plot in the 39 prequels assumed and culminating in Jesus' declaration, "Times up! God's kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message, the good news."

The plot is set, and immediately you and I and the first-century participants and hearers are drawn into the action instantly!

What we notice first<sup>8</sup> is that Jesus is clearly claiming a messianic role for himself. He is encouraging within the people the awakening of their long-anticipated expectation of a Messiah, of God's anointed come to save, to rescue, to overcome evil and ills, and to reestablish God's good and perfect order. Mark begins with John the Baptizer's preparing the way, connecting the Old Testament with the new covenant (of [Jer. 31](#)). Then immediately, we find Jesus taking on the enemy head-on, setting up the fight we all expect will come—good vs. evil, God vs. the devil—a battle to the death! But the struggle never goes beyond words. And words used are those that any Hebrew had access to in their knowledge of life with God. Words from Deuteronomy, the text all Jews learn regardless of background or education.

Coming out of the battle/non-battle, Jesus then, in verse 15, says, "The time is fulfilled..." The Greek word Jesus uses has direct messianic undertones, a word meaning "due season," the season of manifestation that the prophets of old referred to as "that time." "That time" when God's presence would return and right all wrongs, overcome his enemies, and make all things new. "That time" is here, and now, and so perhaps we think the confrontation with evil and ills will escalate, and it does, to some degree.

After calling apprentices, elevating the expectations of ordinary men by inviting them to exercise whatever talent they had in service to a master or Rabbi (thus giving us all hope for the same elevation), Jesus goes on to do those things we'd expect a messiah, a God-anointed to do. In 1:22, Jesus speaks with authority and power that the scribes and Pharisees (the religious and moral leaders) do not. It turns out that Jesus can also do things that demonstrate this authority in more than ideas. He casts out unclean spirits (1:25, 39), heals Simon's mother-in-law (1:30) and many sick people (1:34), and even makes clean (physically and socially) a leper (1:40). Each of these acts is *a sign* of his authority, power over the ills, and evils of this world. Surely he is the anointed one! The one to overcome all the effects of evil by taking them head-on!

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<sup>8</sup> The following is based on Capon, 49-53, and any quotations are his unless otherwise noted.

But then Jesus does something that offends the sensible people; he forgives sin. In chapter two, Jesus continues his preaching the kingdom and performing signs of the kingdom when a person with paralysis is lowered down through a roof to Jesus' feet. And the first thing Jesus does is to forgive the sins of the man (2:5). Everyone could clearly see this man needed healing, but Jesus healed something unseen, brokenness, and division that was—at least by the religious and pious—not an or at least the main issue. A division between God and person, between a person and others, and even a person and himself. And what healed? What overcame the wound of this ill? What overcame the evil within this (and thus every) man? *Forgiveness*.

In this revelatory exchange, Jesus makes sure that the people don't miss that he is still working as the Messiah. For the first time, he explicitly references himself with a messianic title, "the Son of Man" (2:10). Yet, the people's response to Jesus begins to dampen a bit, especially after the actions that follow. Up to this point, Jesus does things that are direct communication of his intent and identity as Messiah, and for the most part, align with the people's expectation of how God should work. God takes on evil directly by judging and removing. But from here on, Jesus does things that confuse the people and the leaders.

For one, he associates with "sleazy types that no proper Messiah would have" anything to do with, like Levi the tax-farmer (2:14). Not only does he talk to Levi, who was both a traitor to his people and religiously filthy by choice, but Jesus also invites him into his intimate and honored company, to follow him as an apprentice! Jesus then follows that up by eating dinner with a "whole crowd of tax collectors and low-lives (2:15)." When the Pharisees confront Jesus (2:16), he says nothing more than that he has come to call sinners, not the righteous (the ones who think they get it), into a healing relationship (2:17).

"Jesus," Capon notes, "for all his messianic pretensions, had a strange lack of interest in looking like a respectable Messiah." Jesus' disinterest in meeting our expectations of how God and his kingdom work continues when Jesus is questioned by both John's disciples and the Pharisees (covering the whole spectrum of religious background, expectation, and intent) as to why his apprentices are required to fast. Jesus' response "Can the wedding guest fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (2:19). Better put, "Who can avoid being at a party when I'm around?" There will be time for fasting (2:20). Still, right now, something new is happening, the new promised of old. Yet the old notations about the Messiah will not be appropriate to handle, to contain what it is that happening (2:21). In case Jesus is not clear enough with his expectations, chapter 2 ends, and chapter 3 begins with Jesus violating the Sabbath not once but twice: by picking grain (2:23) and by healing a man with a withered hand (3:1). Jesus justifies himself first by saying the Son of Man (once again using his messianic title, 2:28) is in charge of the Sabbath, and the Messiah sets the agenda. The second justification is simply Jesus exercising that authority to do good, to save a life, to heal in a way that does not fit with the expectation of the best Jews. All of which causes the religious leaders by chapter 3 verse 6—before any parable is spoken—to hold counsel on "how to destroy" Jesus.

Ironically enough, the unclean spirits which Jesus had been casting out as signs to let people know God's kingdom had come, these spirits recognized Jesus for what he was "the Son of God." Though the people were beginning to think Jesus was not living up to their image of God-With-Us. Yet Jesus told the demons not to share that info (3:12). Apparently, that would only confuse the matter more.

Later in chapter 3, the scribes (those experts in what the Messiah will do and how he will do it) accuse Jesus of being not the anointed one of God, but rather one possessed and under the authority of Beelzebul, the prince

of demons (3:22). It's at this point when the people are confusing Jesus' actions as the Messiah with the activities of the enemy that Jesus begins to speak in parables (3:23),

And Jesus called them to him and said to them in parables...

Here is where Jesus' frustration and sympathetic caution begins to show as he turns the accusations against him back upon the accusers say,

Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of eternal sin'—for they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.' (3:28-30)

After which, even his family began to think he was off his rocker a bit. His mother and brothers try to get him to step back from his words and actions. To this familial intervention, Jesus makes the culturally unacceptable and personal offensive rebuttal that his family is those who do the will of God (3:35), not those who birthed him, raised him, or to whom the culture said he owed his life. And that is how chapter 3 concludes.

“In other words, by the time Mark reaches chapter 4 and introduces the parable of the Sower (the first of the explicit parables of the messianic kingdom), he has already established Jesus not only as a wonder-working, demon-exorcising claimant to the messianic title but also a Sabbath-breaking upstart with a dangerously arrogant sense of his own authority—as somebody, in other words, who is neither interested in, nor palatable to, the religious sensibilities of expert Messiah-watchers. To sum it up: by the end of chapter 3, [Jesus'] family thinks he is crazy (v. 21); the scribes are sure he is possessed by Beelzebub (v. 22); and Jesus' patience is already beginning to wear thin. The Satan-talk, he insists, is sheer nonsense (vv. 23-29); his real family consists of anybody who does the will of God (v. 35); and those who say he has an evil spirit are themselves guilty of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit (vv. 29-30).

Judging from the response Jesus provoked, especially for the religious experts, “it is quite plain that what he said and did didn't look much like religion to them...they are increasingly sure there is something about Jesus' message that they want no part of...making plans to kill him. And by 3:22, they have their case complete. Not only is he an irreligious and therefore bogus messiah who should be killed as soon as possible, but he is also the exact opposite of the Messiah: he is, they are convinced, the devil incarnate,” rather the God-With-Us.

All three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Luke, and Mark) arrive at the point where the kingdom's parables begin. Each is in agreement by this point that Jesus is a Messiah who already fits no known messianic mold of his day, setting the stage for the utter breaking of the mold that is about to begin as Jesus “was teaching them many things in parables” (4:2).

## Knocking Off Misunderstandings | The Necessity of Parables

G.K. Chesterton once gave some tongue-in-cheek advice about the limitations of teaching in parables. “He said that if you give people an analogy that they claim they do not understand, you should graciously offer them another. If they say they don’t understand that either, you should oblige them with a third. But from there on, Chesterton said, if they still insist they do not understand, the only thing left is to praise them for the one truth they do have a grip on: ‘Yes,’ you tell them, ‘that is quite correct. You do not understand.’”<sup>9</sup>

Remember parables are indirect communication, intended not for confusion, but because people were—as we remain—confused about the who, what, why, and how of Jesus. Jesus, in other words, picks up where Chesterton left off. He starts his ministry out straight forward enough, speaking directly about the kingdom come and demonstrating specifically in how it is coming, “but learning is more than information, especially when people think they already understand.”<sup>10</sup> Quickly Jesus noticed that what the people “knew” was actually just misunderstandings.

“In resorting so often to parables,” contends Capon, “[Jesus’] main point was that any understanding of the kingdom his hearers could come up with would be a misunderstanding.”<sup>11</sup> The same misunderstandings that Jesus points out in the sermon on the mount, if you remember. “Mention ‘messiah’ to them, and they would picture a king on horseback, not a carpenter on a cross; mention ‘forgiveness’ and they would start setting up rules about when it ran out. From Jesus’ point of view, *the sooner their misguided minds had the props knocked from under them, the better*. After all their yammer about how God should or shouldn’t run his own operation, getting them just to stand there with their eyes popped and their mouths shut would be a giant step forward.”<sup>12</sup>

Fear-of-God is what we find when we seek wisdom. Eyes popped and mouths shut before a God so incredible and amazing and unexpected and indescribable that we are in awe. Compelled by his splendor (beauty and light), we cannot help but confess our uncleanness, like [Isaiah](#). The parables of Jesus are meant to help us experience moments of such epiphany. They are stories that invite us into the manifestation of how God is with us, for us, working in and through us (and despite us) to put an end to evil.

As we enter into Epiphany, I wonder what misguided views of God’s kingdom we will need to be knocked from under us we enter this new year, anticipating newness, a year and life different, and...Lord willing, searching after wisdom?

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Capon, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Snodgrass, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Capson, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



## COMMUNION |

The apostle Paul refers to the fulfilled time of Jesus as “a mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them [that’s us] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this,” Paul declares, “I toil, struggling with all *his* energy that *he* powerfully works within me.” (Col. 1:26-29).

How is God with us, God for us, God ruling and reigning to bring about his good purposes in and through us within the world as he puts an end to evil? Well, Paul says, it's been a mystery for a while. A mystery, not a puzzle. A puzzle you have to piece together. A mystery in our scriptures is something hidden from our understanding, hidden because of our misunderstandings. **The parables of Jesus are meant to upset our knowledge first and foremost so that by the Spirit of wisdom we seek, we might gain a fresh understanding and knowledge on how to live well with God and others.** After all, the kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field...a pearl of great value...a net filled with an abundant catch. As Paul said, this great mystery, a paradox if you will, requires wisdom which can only be given. Given, as the proverb we read to begin our time together, to the one who seeks it earnestly in faith.

Let us confess these words together in faith:

**Christ’s body and blood: for us, they were given. This bread and this cup tell us we’re forgiven.**

**Christ in us, the hope of glory.**

**With Jesus' energy that he powerfully works with me. Amen**