

Session 5

***Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas***

By Adam Hamilton

Epilogue: “Epiphany...Falling to Our Knees”

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**Introduction Recap...**

The word “incarnation” comes from a Latin word that means, “embodiment” or “become flesh”. One of the foundational beliefs of Christians is in the incarnation, that God actually became flesh in the person of Jesus. The church has struggled throughout centuries to explain the “how” of this mystery. Instead of focusing on the “how”, Hamilton in this book seeks to answer the questions “why” and “to what end” for Christians today.

Some of the questions that will be asked include:

- Why would God come to us in Jesus?
- What was the purpose of the Incarnation?
- How are we meant to respond to the Incarnation, to God’s coming to us in Jesus, today?

In each chapter, Hamilton will focus on one or more names/titles used by the Gospel writers as they introduce the story of Jesus. Hamilton encourages each of us to read one chapter each week during the Season of Advent, with the Epilogue read after Christmas Day or during Epiphany Sunday.

**Opening Activity – “Epiphany”**

- **Epiphany can be defined as “a moment of sudden revelation or insight”. The Christian Church celebrates Epiphany as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentile World through the magi/wise men. What moments of “epiphany” have you experienced this year about God?**

In the Epilogue, Adam Hamilton concludes his book by focusing on the celebration of the season of Christmas, specifically focusing on Epiphany. Through his look at the magi and their calling, he shows how the Season of Christmas lasts the entire year.

## **Epilogue Recap...**

Adam Hamilton begins his Epilogue by saying that just because all the presents have been opened, all the candles have been lit on the Advent wreath, and the birth of Jesus has been celebrated, does not mean the celebration of Christmas is over. Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke share additional stories in their birth narratives. These stories include the visit of the magi, the circumcision and dedication of Jesus at the temple, and the fleeing of the holy family to Egypt in the wake of Herod's decree. More importantly, however, is the fact that the Advent and Christmas season is supposed to shape us all year long!

In the Gospel of Luke, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus remain in Bethlehem after Jesus's birth for presumably forty-one days. During this time, we are told that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day, probably at the house where they were staying. (This follows the command given to Abraham in Genesis 17.) Thirty-three days later, the Law of Moses states that the child should be dedicated to God and a purification offering should be made on behalf of Mary (a lamb and a pigeon, or two pigeons for those who were poor – this was probably done by Joseph and Mary because they were poor).

This sacrifice was made at the temple. As they entered the temple courts, Simeon who was at the temple that day saw the family and lifted a prayer on behalf of Jesus to God. Two of the themes in the prayer – Jesus as the source of salvation and a light for revelation – have already been discussed in Hamilton's book. In the prayer, Jesus is also said to be the "falling and rising of many in Israel", indicating the response of the people to Jesus would reveal their innermost motivations. This reveals to us that the Christmas story is just the beginning – always pointing us to the rest of Jesus's story.

After Simeon, the prophet Anna, eighty-four years young, praised God on behalf of Jesus for his future redemption of Israel. Redemption – a word used to describe the payment to free a slave or servant in debt – is the word Anna uses to describe the climax of the Christmas story. Our redemption through Jesus. Shortly after these temple experiences, Mary and Joseph travel to Nazareth.

The Gospel of Matthew focuses on two different stories, stories that emphasize major themes in the Gospel. First, the story of the coming of the magi/wise men from the East. Second, the flight of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Egypt to avoid the wrath of King Herod.

The story of the magi makes it clear that the Christmas story is for ALL people – not just the Jewish people. This is later seen with the conclusion of the Gospel with the Great Commission. The magi (from where we get the word *magician*) were from Persia (modern day Iran) and were a part of the priests of the Zoroastrian religion. These magi studied the stars, and God spoke to them in the way they were seeking – through the stars. Matthew shares that the magi, wealthy foreigners of another religions from the East, were the first to be beckoned to go see the newborn King. (Luke focuses on the shepherds – the uneducated and poor – to be the first.) These magi would be the first of many Gentiles that would kneel at the feet of Jesus.

The magi traveled across the Fertile Crescent, a 1,200-mile journey that would take up to 100 days to complete. Do not forget the next 1,200 miles and the 100 more days to return home. This trip cost a lot, but revealed the determination to honor this new King. “Zoroastrians believed in a messiah, a figure they called the *Saoshiyant*, one who would restore the world.” (p. 157) Maybe they believed the newborn King of the Jews would be the one they were waiting for. The Zoroastrians shared some common belief of the Jews, but many of their theological beliefs were quite different. However, God, in his mercy, saw the devoutness of their faith, called them, and blessed them. Through them, God took care of Jesus and his family. “Others have seen in these gifts a prophetic picture of Jesus’s identity and destiny: gold, the gift offered to a king; frankincense, the gift offered by the priests to God; and myrrh, used in burial and pointing toward Christ’s death.” (p. 158) The overarching point made by Matthew is that ALL would be drawn to the Light in the World. When the magi arrived, they fell to their knees to honor Him.

After the magi depart, Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt to avoid the threat of King Herod, who was jealous for his throne. Herod was paranoid, willing to kill his own wife and children, to protect his power. The Holy Family were refugees. We live in a world where millions of people have been forced to flee their homes as refugees. To these families, the story of the Holy Family being refugees – forced to flee from their home because of violence and the evil hand of a dictator – can be quite moving. For us, it should be moving as well. “Emmanuel, God among us, experienced the life as a refugee.” (p. 160)

Epiphany is celebrated thirteen days after Christmas on January 6. Epiphany can be defined as “to appear or to be seen or made manifest”.

Epiphany represents God sharing his light and presence through Jesus to the world – especially the Gentile world. The magi bowing to Jesus, and the voice of heaven announcing Jesus as His Son at his baptism, challenges us to listen to Him. We should listen and proclaim the final title we will look at, Jesus as *Lord*.

“Lord” is used more frequently by the early Church and in the New Testament for Jesus. 600 times in the New Testament, the term is used to reference Jesus. The earliest Christian creed simply proclaimed it. The way we use “Lord” today is not how it was used commonly in the past. This English word signified someone in authority, typically the highest in a given realm. It derived from the Old English term *hlaford* or *hlafweard*, which means loaf-warden. It literally means “keeper of the loaf”, the person with the authority and power to distribute bread or the resources of the family. This was literally the person “in charge”. The term *lady* comes from *hladige*, which means loaf-kneader – the one who makes the bread. In the patriarchal world, lord and lady were used to describe authority within the home.

The Greek word for *lord* is *kyrios*, an honorific term used to address the head of household, the master in charge. This term was also used to designate the king, and in biblical times, the top king was the emperor of the Roman Empire. All people were to give their highest allegiance to him. He was the *imperator* (emperor), *augustus* (majestic), *princeps* (first or primary), *Pontifex maximus* (high priest), and *divi filius* (son of a god). For all that followed him, he was THE lord.

No coincidence that Luke begins his Christmas narrative with reference to “Caesar Augustus”. Luke was contrasting Caesar to Christ. The Caesar demanded a census, in his power/riches/authority he is the “Lord”. Yet, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in a stable (homeless), with a trough as his bed. The lowest of the low from earthly standards. However, the angels came to pronounce a change, “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the LORD”.

Messiah, meaning the “anointed one”, means “king”. “This child whose birth the angels announced was both king and lord.” (p. 165) He is not simple “a” lord, but THE LORD, the “Lord of lords and King of kings” as we seen in Revelation. When the early Christians said, “Jesus is Lord”, they were saying he is the highest authority in my life, their master, and they were submitting to His will. That is what we are proclaiming when we begin our prayers with “Lord”. The first Christians were stating clearly that Jesus was their Lord, not Caesar. This should

serve as a good reminder for us in this recent hotly debated election. Jesus is Lord, no one else.

When we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, we are saying he is the authority in our lives. We are yielding to Him. “When the Jewish people stopped speaking God’s personal name, *Yahweh*, they began substituting the word *Adonai* in its place. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the word *kyrios* became the most commonly used word or title for God. This was not lost on early Christians. When they called Jesus *Lord*, they were expressing the mystery that in Jesus God has come to us; Jesus was the Incarnation of Yahweh.” (p. 167) The daily yielding to God, just as the magi knelt before Him makes it clear that Christmas is not over when the decorations come down. Advent and Christmas call us to a lifelong journey of offering our lives to our Lord.

“May this joy be yours as you hail Jesus as your Christ, your Messiah, your King. May you taste of the hope and mercy he offers as you receive him as your Savior. May you feel his peace as you accept that he is your Emmanuel. May you hear him as God’s definitive Word to you, even as you allow his light to dwell in you and be reflected through you. May he be your Lord; guiding, leading, and directing your path.” (p. 169)

### **Follow Up Questions...**

- Hamilton reminds us that the Advent and Christmas Season does not end when all the “decorations are taken down”. How do you celebrate Christmas all year long? What practices can you put in place in this New Year to live the story of Advent and Christmas throughout the year?

### **Scripture Focus – Matthew 2:1-12**

1. The magi followed the star to find the location of the new King. What “stars” have God put in your life to draw you closer to Him?
2. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were presented to Jesus as gifts for the new King. What gifts are you willing to offer the King in 2020? Is there someone/something standing in the way?

## Scripture Focus – Luke 2:25-40

- What lessons can we learn from the life of Simeon and the words he lifted in praise to God when meeting Jesus?
- How can we use this line from the story of Anna, “she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem”, as we seek to make Christmas a yearlong celebration?

## Closing Prayer (Read in Unison) – from John Wesley & Methodist Denomination

*Jesus,  
I am no long my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven.  
Amen*

**Next Week  
A New Study...**

**Winter Bible Study: “Paul’s Prison Epistles – Colossians and Philemon”  
An 8-Week Study on Two of Paul’s New Testament Letters  
Wednesday, January 6 6:30 PM Facebook Live!**