

# Seeing Epiphany Whole

BY STEVEN R. HARMON

**Epiphany can seem like a cacophonous party marking disjointed events: the Magi's visit to Bethlehem, Christ's baptism by John, and Christ's miracle at the wedding at Cana. What ties together this wealth of images?**

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epiph-a-ny *noun*

- 1 *capitalized*: January 6 observed as a church festival in commemoration of the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles or in the Eastern Church in commemoration of the baptism of Christ;
- 2 an appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being;
- 3 **a** (1): a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; (2): an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking; (3): an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure;  
**b**: a revealing scene or moment.<sup>1</sup>

**A**s the dictionary definition of “epiphany” suggests, there is a tension between the non-religious use of the word and the meaning of the Christian observance of Epiphany: the origins, associations, and essential theological meaning of the feast and ensuing season of the Christian year are not easily perceived or intuitively grasped in a “simple and striking” manner. In some traditions, Epiphany also names a season of variable length (depending on the date of Easter) that begins on January 6 and extends to the beginning of Lent. It was celebrated as a commemoration of the baptism of Christ beginning in the third century, but by the fourth century in the West it also became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent associations with

events in the life of Jesus have included Christ's miraculous provision of wine for the wedding at Cana. Rather than a feast and season with an "essential nature or meaning," Epiphany can seem like a cacophonous party marking disjointed events.

What ties together this wealth of images? The Greek word *epiphaneia*, of which "Epiphany" is a transliteration, means "manifestation" – thus the non-religious usage of the word in the sense of "a revealing scene or moment." Understanding Epiphany as a feast and season that celebrates divine revelation can help the Church see Epiphany whole. British Baptist theologian John Colwell recently published a systematic theology creatively structured around the seasons of the Christian year in which Epiphany serves as the basis for the chapter on the doctrine of revelation, titled "The One Who Is Revealed."<sup>3</sup> On the connections between Epiphany, revelation, and Christian living, Colwell writes:

Epiphany is a celebration of a light that has shone and is shining – it shone in Christ, and it shone into our lives – and as a celebration, Epiphany is a response of gratitude and of trust, [for] we have seen this light and we have confidence in this truth; we have come from darkness to light. To have come to see this light which shines through the gospel story, to have come to see it without refusing it, rejecting it, or perverting it, is to live truthfully.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of Epiphany on the truth that the Triune God reveals in Jesus Christ, and the truthful living engendered by our encounter with this revelation, is the common thread running throughout all the Scripture readings and other acts of worship associated with the Epiphany season.

Rather than offering a theoretical account of how the theological theme of revelation lends coherence to the discrete occasions of worship during the season of Epiphany, the remainder of this article will exemplify the sorts of connections that can be made between the doctrine of revelation and any Epiphany-related occasion or act of worship.<sup>5</sup>



### *A Sermon for the Epiphany Season*

*Genesis 18:1-15*

Whether Epiphany is observed only on January 6 or celebrated as a season extending through Ash Wednesday, Epiphany is about divine revelation. The focal event of Epiphany is the coming of God's revelation in Christ to the Gentiles, in particular to the Magi. Like the light of the star that led them to the Christ child, God's revelation shows us something about God, about ourselves, about our world that we never would have seen apart from God's revelation. It is appropriate that we learn about hospitality from Abraham

and Sarah in the midst of Epiphany, for their journey from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land that God would show them foreshadows the Magi's journey to Jesus. The story unfolds in episode after episode of revelatory significance. Time and time again, the story tells us that "the Lord appeared to Abram"; "the Lord came to Abram"; "God spoke to Abram." These acts of revelation show Abraham and Sarah, and their physical and spiritual descendants, something about God, themselves, and their world that they, and we, could never have seen apart from God's revelation.

In this particular episode when "the Lord appeared to Abraham," God discloses something about divine nature and human virtue that greatly enriches our understanding of biblical hospitality. The text has long been read as the epitome of the hospitality that the people of God ought to embody. There is a long tradition of Jewish rabbinical commentary in which Abraham's welcome of his three mysterious visitors teaches that showing hospitality to strangers is a sacred duty, as sacred as welcoming the divine presence. Rabbinical tradition identified these guests as angels and gave them names: Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. That might be saying more than we can know about who these strangers are. But it does suggest that the author of Hebrews had this text in mind when writing "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). The early church fathers and the great Christian commentators since then are unanimous in observing that whatever else this text may mean, it is an example of how hospitality is chief among the practices that characterize saints. As Martin Luther put it in his lectures on Genesis, "There is hospitality wherever the church is.... Therefore let those who want to be true members of the church remember to practice hospitality, to which we are encouraged not only by the example of the saintly patriarch but by very important testimonies of Scripture."<sup>6</sup>

What do this saintly patriarch and matriarch teach us about hospitality?

First, hospitality, like the totality of the Christian life, is the gracious gift of God that comes to us in the freedom of God. We do not become hospitable people by simply deciding to become hospitable and then lining up occasions for showing hospitality. Unlike the contemporary distortion of hospitality as providing entertainment, it is not something we can easily schedule or engineer ourselves. Even when we recognize that hospitality requires God's help and we ask God to

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make us more hospitable, the answer to that prayer may not turn out as we imagine. It is like the old adage about asking God to give us patience. God may very well answer that request, but not in the way we would prefer: not by magically infusing us with something called patience, but by giving us annoying people and exasperating situations – opportunities to practice patience. So it is with hospitality. God helps us be more hospitable by graciously giving us opportunities to practice hospitality. The stranger is never far away, and when the stranger comes to us it is God’s doing. The immigrant, for example, who may not speak our language and may not even be in the country legally, comes to us in the grace and freedom of God. For the civil government, immigration is a policy problem; for the Church, immigration is a God-given opportunity to be the Church: “There is hospitality wherever the church is,” said Luther. That is God’s gracious work. It is the grace of creation. God created us to be people who welcome the other; when we practice hospitality, we are doing what God freely and graciously created us to do. It is the grace of redemption. As fallen sinners, our inclination is to be self-centered and closed off from the other. In redemption, God reorients us away from self and toward God and toward the other. It is the grace of sanctification. We cannot do this in and of ourselves, so the hospitable God reproduces the divine character in us through the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit. Hospitality is through and through the gracious work of God.

That means it should not be an onerous burden; it is not something we *have* to do, it is something we *get* to do. It is a gift. There is a line in the U2 song “One” that is frequently misheard: it is not “we’ve *got* to carry each other,” it is “we *get* to carry each other.” That is exactly right. Like Abraham and Sarah, we get to practice hospitality, by the grace of God, whenever and however the stranger comes to us.

We also learn from Abraham and Sarah that hospitality happens on a journey. We tend to think of hospitality as something offered by people of means, people who have arrived in life, people who at least have a home. Where is the home of Abraham and Sarah? In this story they are camping out at Hebron, one of many places they camped while journeying toward the place God would show them. When the Septuagint translated these accounts of the various places Abraham and Sarah settled, it did not use the Greek verb *katoikeo*, which means to dwell or settle down somewhere (literally, to put down your house somewhere). It used *paroikeo*, which means to journey, to live somewhere as a stranger or alien (literally, to have your house along the way). When Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church at Corinth late in the first century, he took that same word *paroikeo* that the Septuagint used for the sojourns of Abraham and applied it to the relation of the church to the place it finds itself. Its superscription begins, “The church of God which *sojourns* in Rome, to the church of God which *sojourns* in Corinth.” The home from which we show hospitality is

not a geographical place or a physical structure or a station in life; our home is the Church on a journey toward the heavenly city.

There is also a hint in this story that the hospitality we show to others is grounded in the hospitality of the Triune God. The text makes it clear in 18:1 and again in 18:13 that the Lord God himself appeared and spoke to Abraham. What most English translations render as “Lord” in small caps is the divine name “Yahweh” in Hebrew. It is clear that this is ultimately an encounter with God himself, but who exactly are the three men? It is easy for Christians who know the one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to read this and say, “It’s obvious these three men represent the three persons of the Trinity.” The earliest Christian interpreters of this text among the church fathers were not so sure. Eusebius of Caesarea thought one of the men was the Divine Word appearing in human form, and it was only this one of the three that Abraham addressed as Lord. Ambrose of Milan thought they typified the Trinity: “[Abraham] added religious devotion to hospitality,” said Ambrose, “for although he beheld three, he adored one, and while keeping a distinction of the persons, yet he called one Lord.”<sup>7</sup> That is pretty precise Trinitarian theology for someone who lived two-and-a-half millennia before the Council of Nicaea! Augustine, on the other hand, was content to call them angels, appearing as human beings, through whom God spoke.

Fast-forwarding to the Reformers – Martin Luther, I think, got it right. Luther granted that according to the historical meaning of the text, these are three men (perhaps angels) whom Abraham initially regards as human beings and receives with hospitality, but whom Abraham comes to recognize as emissaries of the invisible God. Thus we do not depend on this passage for our doctrine of the Trinity; the foundations for that are laid solidly enough elsewhere in Scripture. Yet Luther argues that there is a legitimate hidden meaning in this text, according to which it is good and proper to read it in light of the Church’s biblical Trinitarian theology, for the God who encountered Abraham in the three strangers by the oaks of Mamre is the one God we know in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> We have here a hint that God is hospitable within God, even prior to the creation of the world and apart from God’s hospitality toward us. From eternity the God who is love has always been persons in loving, hospitable relationship to one another, always fully open to one another and fully sharing the being and work of one another. This God creates the world and humanity within it as an expression of hospitality, and despite our sin continues to practice hospitality toward us, welcoming those who because of sin are strangers to God. We are created in the image of the hospitable God to be hospitable people. Biblical hospitality is nothing less than participating in the life of the Triune God ourselves and welcoming others to join us in that participation. There is a sense, then, that hospitality is not so much a distinct practice among other practices of the Christian life as it is a particular way of naming the whole of Christian life. We know what sort of life this

is because it is grounded in the hospitality of the Triune God, and we know what this looks like because hospitality took on human flesh and dwelt among us, doing things like feeding great crowds of more than five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17) and more than four thousand hungry people (Matthew 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-10).

We learn not only from Abraham and Sarah but also from Jesus and his disciples in their feeding of the crowds that hospitality is a community practice. In more ways than we will ever know, our seemingly individual acts of hospitality are not individual. They depend on the hospitality of others with whom we are in relationship. It is not only Abraham, but also Sarah and their servant who, working together, manage to pull off this impromptu feast. And it is Jesus and his disciples, and perhaps others in the crowds who shared what they had, who together participate in Jesus' miraculous act of divine hospitality. As Luther said, "There is hospitality wherever the church is." Hospitality is an ecclesial practice: it takes the Church to practice hospitality, and not merely the individual acts of its members. We would have no idea what the practice of biblical hospitality looks like in the flesh, in the here and now, were it not for the fact that other members of the Church have extended hospitality to us and modeled hospitality to others before our very eyes. The Church forms us in hospitality, and when we practice hospitality ourselves we do it in community as members of the Church.

We also learn from Abraham and Sarah, in an anticipatory way, what we learn fully in Jesus Christ: that hospitality is a cruciform practice. Jesus tells us that following him means denying self and taking up the cross – it is a radical reorientation of our lives away from self-centeredness and toward costly hospitality, toward an openness to others that is willing to suffer for their sake. Abraham and Sarah experience this and model this in more than one way. Their act of hospitality here points toward another – their parenting of Isaac in their old age. That practice of hospitality led to another event even more profoundly cruciform: Abraham's offering of Isaac in chapter 22, a revelatory event that pointed toward the costly divine hospitality by which God reconciles strangers to himself in Christ. That cruciform hospitality is central to the Epiphany hymn "O Love, How Deep, How Broad."<sup>9</sup>

O Love, how deep, how broad, how high,  
how passing thought and fantasy:  
that God, the Son of God, should take  
our mortal form for mortals' sake!

For us to evil power betrayed,  
scourged, mocked, in purple robe arrayed,  
he bore the shameful cross and death,  
for us gave up his dying breath.

All glory to our Lord and God  
for love so deep, so high, so broad –  
the Trinity whom we adore  
forever and forevermore.

The Apostle Paul knew something of that cruciform hospitality. He writes in Galatians 4:12-20 of receiving that sort of hospitality from his readers, who, had it been possible, would have torn out their eyes and given them to him: “You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (4:13-14). Then he speaks of his own experience of the pains of childbirth for their sake until Christ is formed in them. Hospitality led him to take up the cross himself and die a martyr’s death for the sake of others’ salvation, as have innumerable other martyrs through the history of the Church.

The witness of the martyrs leads me to point out something else hinted at in this text: that hospitality is a missionary practice. We might not be accustomed to thinking of Abraham and Sarah as missionaries, but that is what they were in their practice of hospitality. As they journeyed from place to place, welcoming strangers along the way, they shared their faith in the God who called them from their country and kindred to the land prepared for them. From Abraham and Sarah to this day, missionaries have found opportunities to share the good news through receiving and rendering hospitality. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a famous practitioner of missionary hospitality. You may remember the media reaction when Mother Teresa’s correspondence with her confessors was published in 2007 and it became known that for the last half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever – neither in her heart nor in the Eucharist. That shocked some people. But we of course know that the long, dark night of the soul is a common Christian experience, and the Mother Teresas of the Church are not exempt. When I read an article on that revelation, I was struck by the timing of her experience of the seeming absence of God.<sup>10</sup> The absence began right at the time she embraced the work of showing hospitality to the poor and dying of Calcutta in 1948. I do not find that merely coincidental. Like the righteous in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 who failed to recognize in their earthly lives that their practice of hospitality was done also to Christ, Mother Teresa did not consciously experience God’s presence where it was in fact most near to her: in the poor and dying she served in Calcutta. Before January 1948, she had known God’s presence in powerful mystical experiences and audible voices; after January 1948, God became present in the poor, even if unrecognized. Luther made precisely that connection in his comments on Genesis 18: “What greater praise can there be for this virtue than that those who are hospitable are not receiving a human being but are receiving the Son of God Himself?

On the other hand, what is more hideous than inhospitality? By it you shut out from your house not a human being but the Son of God, who suffered and died for you on the cross."<sup>11</sup>

Are you longing for a deeper experience of God's presence? "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels" – and even the Triune God – unawares. May it be so, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one hospitable God, now and forever. Amen.

## NOTES

1 "epiphany," *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany)).

2 Peter G. Cobb, "The History of the Christian Year," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, and Paul Bradshaw, eds., *The Study of Liturgy*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 459-460.

3 John E. Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine: A Liturgical Sketch of Christian Faith and Faithfulness* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2007), 45-59.

4 *Ibid.*, 56-57.

5 During Epiphany 2009, I preached in a chapel service at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School as part of a year-long series "Table Grace: A Biblical Call to Hospitality" based on Beth Newman's book *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007). Seeing Epiphany whole, as a season celebrating divine revelation and its relevance for our lives, enabled me to make connections between the assigned chapel series text on the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:1-15 and some of the readings appointed for that Tuesday in the week of 4 Epiphany from the daily office lectionary. An abridged version of that homily follows.

6 Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 3:178.

7 Mark Sheridan, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 2: Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 61-62.

8 Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in *Luther's Works* 3:194.

9 "O Love, How Deep, How Broad," fifteenth-century Latin hymn translated by Benjamin Webb, altered (verses 1, 4, and 6), in *Worship & Rejoice* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 2001), 244.

10 David Van Biema, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," *Time*, August 23, 2007 (accessed July 22, 2011) [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html).

11 Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in *Luther's Works* 3:178.



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