

Epiphany
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Rev. Paul Moore

Two Worlds, Two Chiefs

There is a man I grew up with in Ecuador named Randy Borman. He is a year or two older than I am. What was blond hair and a red beard are now all white. His parents, hailing originally from Michigan, worked among the A'i people of the upper northern Amazon region of Ecuador. He is now the undisputed chief of the tribe.

I don't think he ever set out to be chief, in fact, I doubt very highly if the tribe has ever quite had a chief like Randy. He is not of their blood, though he is legally classified in Ecuador as A'i. He speaks three languages, and is university trained in the U.S., and he carries two passports. Though I don't think he ever finished an undergraduate degree, he was awarded an honorary doctorate degree from Northwest University in Kirkland.

He has established a foundation for the preservation of the territory originally controlled by the A'i, and negotiated control over it with the Ecuadorian government. Relying on worldview, technology and knowledge of their environment native to the A'i, he has developed a carbon-0 way of life even in today's world. His chiefdom is not based on the old ways, where chiefs were powerful medicine men who protected their people through healing, counseling and spiritual warfare. It is based on the new world the A'i are forced to live in, one of western governments, petroleum companies, schools and airplanes. On a deeper level, he is still chief for the same reasons the old chiefs were chief. He works to protect and provide for his people.

When he was 10 years old, life was as it had been for generations. There were still giant Amazonian otters and fresh-water dolphins in the river. The medicine men still changed into jaguars at night to see where game was, to forestall enemy encroachment and to learn the cures for diseases. The old ways, though not perfect, were fit for their days, but in a new world, a new kind of chief was required. I wonder how many A'i foresaw this, and yet, here he is. An unexpected voice of hope and liberation. Two worlds, two kinds of chief.

We all have Randys in our lives, people or things or events that, speaking from an unexpected quarter, point us in a new direction. Often unforeseen, they are all the more significant because of it. They force us to choose, in a way. Two voices, two paths. Two worlds, two kinds of chief.

We all know the story of the Wise Men. It's the stuff of Christmas cards, movies and a most famous Epiphany song. We focus on the gifts, their place of origin and what happened after the wise men left, but when you stop and think about it, they, too, dealt with voices that spoke from unexpected quarters, sending them in unforeseen directions.

They saw a star. Scholarship suggests they were Zoroastrian astrologers, a priestly class of counselors to royalty. They were certainly not Jewish, and though they may have had

knowledge of the Torah, they were certainly not adherents to it. Because of their training, they recognize the rise of a special star and knew its significance. It changes their path—they set out on a journey.

When they get to Jerusalem, they go to King Herod—of course. It was logical for them to expect the birth of a new king to have taken place in a king's residence, but King Herod knows nothing of a new king, and their news is troubling...and Matthew introduces a theme that will run throughout the Gospel. Two worlds, two chiefs. Two kingdoms, two kings, that of heaven and that of earth.

However, their direction does not come from the king, but from the Jewish Scriptures. The prophecy from Micah identifies the location. Herod, conniving, power-grasping man that he is, knows that it is important to keep enemies close, and makes a vacuous promise. The wise men resume their search, and it is fruitful. When they find the new king, they honor him with royal gifts. Then, they get further instructions from an unexpected source. A dream warns them of Herod's duplicity, and they escape. Their flight triggers the next story in Matthew, the Slaughter of the Innocents, but that only sets the way of the wise men in contrast to that of Herod. They are innocent of Herod's bloodbath. They were walking according to the other kingdom that took them down another path.

This really is a story of two kingdoms. Herod's kingdom was sufficient to the world it lived in. The world of Rome was one of ingroups and outgroups maintained by war, domination and control. Herod played the game well. The Kingdom of Heaven is heard only when we listen to a different world, one built on the justice of self-giving love, and that knows no outsiders. These foreign, Gentile, pagan wise men played this game well.

We still live in the same two kingdoms. The government of this nation maintains its power through a delicate dance between two major political parties. The dance itself has a purpose. It grants us the illusion of rule by the people while really keeping the power in the hands of a few powerful power-brokers. The dance is there for all to see, but the powerbrokers are often out of sight and out of reach. For instance, as Shahnaz Habib eloquently describes in her book, *Airplane Mode*,¹ passports are a modern invention, whose purpose was originally to keep the working class at home and allow the wealthy to travel. In Canada, around the turn of the 20th century, it became expressly a way of keeping Indians in India, because "everyone knew that Canadians want a white country." Now, passports are available in a dizzying array of issuing countries and designations, but visas...now there is where the subtle sorting happens. Certain people are granted visas while others are not. Certain people don't even need them while others cannot travel without them. Instead of soldiers marching up and down our streets, we have unseen powerbrokers who write policies, making it easier for you if you belong to the dominant white U.S. based values and world view of those power-brokers, and much harder if you do not. This is the kingdom of Herod.

¹ Habib, Shahnaz. "Airplane Mode: An Irreverent History of Travel." *Library Journal* 148, no. 9 (2023): 100-101.

On the other hand, we have voices like that of our friend, Jay Bowen. Like our Zoroastrian astrologer worshipers of Jesus, Jay's world view does not deny our Christian faith, in fact he is fond of pointing out the points of convergence, but it is different, and comes at spiritual reality from a different place than western Christianity. He worships in spirit and in truth, with other images and movements. He is brother, for the kingdom he and we share knows no outsiders.

Like wise men from another land, he speaks and paints and creates jewelry to heal and bring harmony. The painting he gave me that hangs in my office protects me—just as he said. He speaks truth we may not be able to hear from our own prophets. He gives us royal gifts.

Like the wise men's dream, he offers a way home by a different path. It's like the wise men's path, home again by a different way, to the place where we truly belong, in a world of justice born of self-giving love, where there are no outsiders.

We must live in Herod's world, for it structures our society, government and economy, but we must never fail to also live in the other world, the larger, truer, eternal world. We must never shrink from measuring Herod's world with the measure of Heaven, or let our allegiance to the heavenly kingdom falter.

The light of the Kingdom of heaven, shining from unexpected places, is the light of Epiphany.