



ADULT STUDY

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LEADER'S GUIDE Session 1: Wonderful Counselor

The Messiah: An Adult Advent Study

Goals for the Session

Participants will ponder the royal title “Wonderful Counselor” and learn how people understood it in the time of Isaiah. They will explore how Jesus did or did not fulfill the title and reflect on how Christians interpret Jesus’ embodiment of that title.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the Participant Handout and this Leader’s Guide. Adjust the activities in this guide to fit the needs of your group. It will be very difficult to fully do every activity in this plan in less than an hour. Consider what you might shorten or eliminate.
- Prepare a recording of Handel’s *Messiah* and the equipment to play it.
- Arrange an Advent wreath with four purple candles on a table. If you do not have a wreath, place four purple candles in a circle. If your church’s policy prohibits lit candles, battery-operated candles are a good substitute.
- Print one of the five aspects of Jesus’ role as Wonderful Counselor on each of five sheets of newsprint. They are: Jesus was wise, Jesus is extraordinary, Jesus’ teachings and actions display inexplicable wisdom, Jesus threatened the established order, and Jesus invited followers to continue his mission.
- Print the heading “King Jesus?” on another newsprint sheet.

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Hear a selection from the *Messiah*
- Light the Advent wreath
- Pray

EXPLORING

- Consider the original context
- Explore the royal title
- Examine the power of King Jesus

RESPONDING

- Respond to five aspects of Jesus’ role

CLOSING

- Prepare for the next session
- Pray

Materials Needed

- Advent Wreath and four candles
- Lighter or matches
- Device to play Handel’s *Messiah*
- Copies of this Participant Handout
- Copies of the Participant Handout for session 2

- Copies of the Resource Sheet at the end of this Leader's Guide
- Newsprint
- Markers
- Bibles

Teaching Tip

For adults accustomed to focusing on the beauty of the story of Christmas, it may be new information that Jesus was born into an ominous political situation dominated by Rome and colored by Rome's coercive military rule and crushing tax structure. It may be surprising news—and perhaps even an unwelcome insight—to consider Jesus as subversive.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Hear a Selection from the Messiah

Welcome participants as they arrive. Invite them to sit quietly as you play "For unto Us a Child Is Born" from Handel's *Messiah*.

2. Light the Advent Wreath

Explain that for the four Sundays of Advent, participants will be engaged in an exploration of the oracle in Isaiah 9:2–7, specifically the four extravagant royal titles assigned to a new king. Christians have looked to these titles and other prophecies to undergird the claim that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament.

As you light the first candle, say, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. . . . For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor."

3. Pray

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

Shine your light on us, O God, as we seek to be enlightened. By your Spirit, open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts as we prepare for the coming of your son. Amen.

Exploring (20 minutes)

4. Consider the original context

Have someone read aloud the Scripture passage for the study, Isaiah 9:2–7.

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout to anyone who does not have a copy.

Invite the group to quickly scan the information in the Participant Handout under the heading "Isaiah in His Own Liturgical Context."

Distribute the Resource Sheet from the end of this Leader's Guide and ask participants to read the background and quotations from presidential inaugural addresses. Discuss:

- What is the tone of these quotes? What expectations are being set up by the incoming president for the coming term of office?
- How do they compare with what is anticipated in the oracle of Isaiah?
- Based on the background information, what events in the country's immediate past shaped what led up to the election of each of the presidents? Because of, or in spite of, these events, what was the mood of the country in each case?

5. Explore the Royal Title

On a sheet of newsprint or a board, print the royal title "Wonderful Counselor." Invite the group to scan the section titled "Wonderful Counselor = Wise Governance." Discuss:

- The author notes that Handel mistakenly inserted a comma between the two words in the title. What difference does that make to its meaning?
- What are the two possible interpretations of the word "wonderful"?
- How did King Hezekiah measure up in terms of this royal title?
- In looking at the terms of the presidents whose speeches are quoted, how did they measure up to the high expectations people had for them at their inaugurations?

6. Examine the Power of King Jesus

Call attention to the section titled "Jesus and the Empire of Rome." Scan and summarize the first paragraph.

Ask the group to listen for evidence of the royal power of Caesar as someone reads the two Scripture passages (Luke 2:1–3 and Mark 1:15) in the Participant Handout. Discuss the following:

- The author notes that “. . . the larger drama of the Gospel exhibits the way in which King Jesus takes issue with the royal power of Rome” and that Jesus’ power “. . . is intrinsically revolutionary and subversive against every repressive regime.” What is your response to this assertion?
- Can you think of other examples in the Gospels of ways Jesus’ words or actions support this claim?
- What other descriptors would you use to delineate the power of King Jesus?
- What kind of new regime will King Jesus usher in, and how will it differ from the rule of the Roman Empire?

The author observes that Jesus clearly fit no royal expectations. Point out the newsprint sheet headed “King Jesus?” Ask participants to name qualities and expectations people might have for a king. Then ask them to name examples they can remember from the gospel accounts of qualities or characteristics of Jesus or of his life that are in contrast to the normal expectations one might have of a monarch. List these on the newsprint or board.

Responding (10 minutes)

7. Respond to Five Aspects of Jesus’ Role

Form five small groups or pairs. Assign to each group one of the five aspects of Jesus’ role as wonderful counselor. Ask them to read and discuss the assigned aspect and to prepare a very brief summary of this aspect to tell the larger group. After allowing time for pairs or groups to work, come together to report.

Following the summary presented by each group, invite the group to read the conclusion silently. Discuss:

- How would you describe the order of power and truth presently holding sway in contemporary culture?
- In our preparation for and celebration of Christmas, what would constitute interrupting the “foolish practice of business as usual”?

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Prepare for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the Participant Handout for the next session and agree as a group to read it at home before coming to the next session.

9. Pray

Repeat the following from Isaiah 9, which you used as you lit the first Advent candle:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light . . .” (*Invite participants to name places where the light of Christ is needed.*)

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor.” (*Allow for a time of silence.*)

Holy One, we give thanks for the gift of Jesus and for the ways in which he fulfills the role of Wonderful Counselor. Guide us in the coming week as we prepare for his coming at Christmas. Amen.

Encourage participants who have an Advent wreath at home to use the portion of the Isaiah 9 Scripture from this session as they light the first candle.

Teaching Alternatives

- Search carols for royal imagery. Our Christmas carols abound with royal imagery. Distribute hymnals and invite the group to peruse the carols and jot down examples of royal imagery that they find. As a whole group, record those images on newsprint. What do these images say about the kind of king Jesus was?
- Create a word picture. Ask the five small groups who are each examining an aspect of Jesus’ role as Wonderful Counselor to create word pictures to illustrate what each aspect means. In the center of a sheet of newsprint or poster board, have them print their assigned aspect, for example, “Jesus was wise,” in large letters. Then encourage them to identify words and phrases from the Participant Handout that clarify what that means and decide how to arrange them on the sheet in order to create a word picture. Once the words and phrases are penciled in, they can use colored markers to print them on the sheet.
- Research Pope Francis. One aspect of Jesus’ role as Wonderful Counselor is that Jesus invited followers to continue his mission, summoning his followers to continue his way of subversive astonishment and transformation in the world. Invite

the group to revisit what the Participant Hand-out has to say about this aspect. Then invite them to use their Smartphones to research the current pope, Pope Francis. In what ways is the papacy like a monarchy? How has this pope, as a follower of Jesus, confounded expectations and continued Jesus' way of subversive astonishment in the world?

Key Scripture

Isaiah 9: 2–7

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SAMPLE SESSION

Resource Sheet

Presidential Inaugural Addresses

President Abraham Lincoln

Background: The Civil War had been raging for four years with a terrible toll for both sides. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union army grew with the addition of tens of thousands of black soldiers. A string of battlefield victories contributed to the landslide victory of President Lincoln over George McClellan, whose party had demanded a two-state peace. With the end of war in sight, Lincoln looked forward to achieving a just and lasting peace without retribution for the South.

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Second Inaugural Address, 1865¹

President John F. Kennedy

Background: The 1950s had been a time of pessimism, with the nation embroiled in the Cold War. The civil rights movement was gaining momentum. The bungled U-2 spy plane incident, Cuba’s communist regime, and the launching of Sputnik by the U.S.S.R. in 1957 contributed to a general feeling of malaise. In his inaugural address, President Kennedy announced the start of a new era in American politics, one to which Americans could look forward with optimism and confidence.

“Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”

Inaugural Address, 1961²

President Ronald Reagan

Background: The nation had experienced an economic downturn, inflation, and the energy crisis during the Carter years, leading to what Carter himself called a crisis of confidence. As Reagan was giving his Inaugural Address, fifty-two Americans who had been held hostage in Iran for the previous 444 days were released. Throughout the country, there were celebrations. People wrapped the country in yellow ribbons, plastered freedom messages on billboards, and started preparations for welcoming the freed hostages home.

“... I believe we, the Americans of today, are ready to act worthy of ourselves, ready to do what must be done to ensure happiness and liberty for ourselves, our children and our children’s children.

And as we renew ourselves here in our own land, we will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world. We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom.”

First Inaugural Address, 1981³

Barack Obama

Background: Even in the face of a crumbling economy and with wars to fight on two fronts, January 20, 2009, was a high point for the United States. The nation's first black president, Barack Obama, had impressively high approval ratings while outgoing President George W. Bush's favorability had tanked. There was an air of hope and optimism. Nearly two million Americans gathered in Washington, DC. Throngs filled every corner of the National Mall, weeping with joy, waving flags, and hugging strangers. After the swearing-in ceremony, a 15,000-person parade accompanied the first family to the White House.

"Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends—honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism—these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history.

What is demanded, then, is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept, but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character than giving our all to a difficult task."

First Inaugural Address, 2009⁴

Endnotes

1. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," Mar. 4, 1865, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>.
2. John F. Kennedy, "Inaugural Address," Jan. 20, 1961, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres56.html>.
3. Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address," Jan. 20, 1981, <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres61.html>.
4. Barack Obama, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," The White House Blog, Jan. 21, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address>.



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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 1: Wonderful Counselor

The Messiah: An Adult Advent Study

Introduction to the Study

Christians have claimed from their beginnings that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. His reign began a new testament of the relationship between God and humanity. For that reason Christians often call the Hebrew Scriptures the Old Testament. Jesus did not replace or deny the expectations of a messiah previously told. He fulfilled them. The people were waiting for God to act, and many oracles in the Old Testament predicted what God would do.

What were these expectations and *did* Jesus fulfill them?

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

Isaiah 9:2–7 is a well-known oracle that uses four royal titles in verse 6—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This Advent study will ponder each title and how the people understood it then, how Jesus did or did not fulfill the title,

and how Christians interpret Jesus as representative of that title.

As we ponder the use of those titles with reference to Christmas and the birth of Jesus, two things become clear. First, in the witness to Jesus by the early Christians in the New Testament, they relied heavily on Old Testament “anticipations” of the coming Messiah. But second, Jesus did not fit those “anticipations” very well such that a good deal of interpretive imagination was required in order to negotiate the connection between the anticipation and the actual bodily, historical reality of Jesus.

Isaiah in His Own Liturgical Context

The oracle of Isaiah 9:2–7 is well known among us because of Handel’s *Messiah*. The oracle did not *anticipate* or *predict* Jesus. There is no doubt that it pertained to the eighth century BCE, the time of Isaiah the prophet. While the oracle might have been utilized to announce and celebrate the birth of a new royal prince in Jerusalem, namely Hezekiah, it is more probable that it pertained to the coronation of the new king. As with the anticipation of every new U.S. president, the coronation of the new king in Jerusalem was an occasion for anticipation of a new wave of well-being, peace, and prosperity. The liturgical articulation of such expectation would have been extravagant and excessive as such occasions are, not unlike the political speeches of

promise with which we are familiar in our own political context. Included in such flowery language would have been a traditional inventory of slogans or mantras about the new king, the sort of inventory that we know from ancient Egyptian liturgies that celebrate a new pharaoh. Thus the royal liturgy in Jerusalem likely resembled coronation liturgies in surrounding countries.

Specifically, the oracle of Isaiah 9:2–7 anticipates a new regime of peace and prosperity in Jerusalem, a season of “great light” that is contrasted with the “darkness” of imperial exploitation under the empire of Assyria. The coming king, it is anticipated, will release Judah from that oppression, and this oracle anticipates a new regime of “endless peace” with “justice and with righteousness” forever (v. 7).

“Wonderful Counselor” = “Wise Governance”

Our focus for the four Sundays in Advent will be to consider the four extravagant royal titles assigned to the new king in verse 6. The first of these is “wonderful counselor.” At the outset it may be noted that Handel, in his famous oratorio, mistakenly placed a comma after “wonderful,” thus dividing the phrase into two distinct parts. The two terms are to be taken together as “wonderful counselor” or “counselor of wonders.”

The term “counselor” refers to the exercise of governance, the capacity to administer, to plan, and to execute policy. God is praised for assigning a new human king who is expected to devise plans and policies for the benefit of the entire realm. The term “wonderful” may be a modifier for

the noun “counselor,” suggesting that the new king will have extraordinary wisdom and foresight about planning. Or it may suggest that the royal plans and policies will be of exceptional quality, a big surprise that goes beyond all the usual conventions of political power and practice. Either way it is expected that the new king will initiate policy and practice that will dazzle in its effectiveness and in its practical benefit for the subjects of the king.

In actual practice the regime of Hezekiah at the end of the eighth century BCE in Jerusalem did enact some

remarkable policies, notably withstanding the assault of the Assyrian army (Isa. 36–39). In the end, however, the rule of Hezekiah proved to be a disappointment. This glorious anticipation did not work out, for Hezekiah ultimately capitulated to the rising power of Babylon (Isa. 39). Perhaps it is inevitable, given the unpredictable nature of historical reality, that such high expectations could not be realized in fact. Perhaps it is always so. That reality, however, does not preclude the ambitious expectations for the next coming king, as is always hoped for all over again, just as we do with every new U.S. president.

Jesus and the Empire of Rome

This oracular text, with its fourfold inventory of honorific titles for the king—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—was ready at hand for the early church when it came to bear witness to Jesus. It was, moreover, ready at hand when Handel offered his glorious work of connecting the reality of Jesus to Old Testament expectation. The expected “messiah” would be received as a king, and so our Christmas carols abound with royal imagery. That is, they recognized the “long expected” king who would set his people free. As ancient King Hezekiah had to face the Assyrian Empire with its threat, so Jesus came into an ominous political situation that was dominated

... the teaching of Jesus attests to the possibility of God that the world has long since taken to be impossible. That is what is wonderful about his teaching.

by the Roman Empire, with its coercive military presence and its equally coercive tax system. The royal power of “Caesar” (emperor) was to be challenged by the new Jewish king who would, in Jewish expectation, defeat the power of Rome. Thus the Christmas story of Luke 2:1–20 is situated amid the power and command of Rome:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while

Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. (Luke 2:1–3)

The initial announcement of the Gospel in Mark, moreover, is cast in royal language: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

The larger drama of the Gospel exhibits the way in which King Jesus takes issue with the royal power of Rome and subsequently with every regime of power that imagines it is ultimate and absolute. The power of King Jesus is intrinsically revolutionary and subversive against every repressive regime.

Jesus as a Surprising Alternative Who Evoked Amazement and Opposition

This leaves for the early church, and for subsequent church interpretation, to delineate what kind of king Jesus is. How will he oppose the royal power of Rome? In that context Isaiah’s oracle provides both eloquence and substantive guidance for discerning the new rule of Jesus. The general claim of the oracle is that a new regime of peace and well-being will displace the older (Roman) order of violence and extortion.

The anticipated king who will accomplish this displacement is termed, in the oracle, a “wonderful counselor.” It remains then, for the church at Christmas, to delineate how it is that Jesus is the anticipated “wonderful counselor” and what that title means for good news in the world. While royal language is often used for witness to Jesus because he is the king of the kingdom of God that is at hand, he clearly fits no conventional royal expectation. And the charge at his subsequent trial that he claimed to be “King of the Jews” rests with great uneasiness for him (John 18:34–36).

But let us consider his role as “wonderful counselor,” as agent of extraordinary plans and policies for the ordering of the public life of his people.

1. Jesus Was Wise

The king as “counselor” will be wise, and so he will devise wise plans, with a capacity to penetrate beyond conventional assumptions and with peculiar discernment about how the world works and what the consequences of policies will be. Jesus astonishes his contemporaries by his capacity to see and act beyond

conventional assumptions. As they observed his work, people asked: “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” (Mark 6:2).

The familiar birth story in Luke 2, moreover, moves promptly on to his childhood where he is celebrated for his uncommon wisdom:

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. . . . And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. (Luke 2:40, 52)

He was already then discerned, according to this testimony and memory, as being on his way as a “counselor” who will be extraordinary in his discernment. The notion of his wisdom, moreover, is extended in Paul’s exposition of the wisdom of the cross that contradicts the “foolishness” of the world (1 Cor. 1:25, 27). If we consider this reference in the context of governance, being a king, then we can see that the raw power of Rome was indeed foolishness, even though it is typical for a world power.

2. Jesus Is Extraordinary

Jesus is extraordinary (“wonderful”) in his teaching because he exhibited an authority that was unlike the authority of the scribes, the shrewdest and most learned of his contemporaries (Mark 1:22).

And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished. (Luke 2:47–48)

His teaching contradicted all usual assumptions. His teaching confounded the authorities; he engaged the powerless crowds, as he articulated a world under “alternative governance” that did not conform to old patterns of abuse and exploitation. Thus it becomes a mantra of response to his subversive testimony:

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22)

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be

saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." (Mark 10:25–27)

The terms "possible" and "impossible" contain echoes of the old question posed in Genesis 18:14: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" The term "wonderful," moreover, is the same word used in the prophetic oracle, "wonderful counselor." Thus the teaching of Jesus attests to the possibility of God that the world has long since taken to be impossible. That is what is wonderful about his teaching.

It requires an uncommon wisdom to interrupt the foolish practice of business as usual.

His teaching evidenced a kind of wisdom that was unusual. He is wise beyond explanation! For that reason he constitutes an immense threat to conventional learning and conventional power. Thus his story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) or of the two sons (Luke 15:11–32) or of the workers who came late and received equal pay (Matthew 20:1–16) contradicted common practice in elemental and unmistakable ways. He is wonderful in his teaching because he opens up new possibilities that were thought to be impossible. The foolish rulers of the age did not want such impossibilities to become possible, for such possibilities would override and displace all present power arrangements and all current distribution of resources.

3. Jesus' Teaching and Actions Display Inexplicable Wisdom

It is evident, moreover, that as his teaching was marked by inexplicable wisdom, so his actions were commensurately astonishing; he accomplished deeds of rescue and restoration that ordinary reason had declared impossible. Thus in Mark 7:31–35 he deals with a deaf man who had "an impediment in his speech." He put "his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue" and the man was healed. And the observers of his action responded: "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak" (v. 37).

From such particular cases of "wonderful," the gospel tradition can generalize:

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." (Luke 7:22)

The old limits of the possible have been exposed as fraudulent inventions designed to keep the powerless in their places. Jesus violates such invented limitations and opens the world to the impossible. He ends that defiant declaration with the admonition: "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me" (v. 23).

Of course the stories of Jesus show that those who "take offense" are the elite leaders who have articulated the possible in a particular way; they have persuaded the common folk that their definition of the possible is correct. But now they have been exposed. They will strike back, in their foolishness, to halt such "wonderful counsel."

4. Jesus Threatened the Established Order

The capacity of Jesus for the wonderful—the impossible—constituted an immediate threat to all established power arrangements. He is promptly seen to be dangerously subversive because he challenges and contradicts all normal assumptions. This is a king who refuses to accept conventional notions of governance. Indeed, he inverts power arrangements just as his mother, Mary, anticipated:

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts
of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:51–53

Her song is an anticipation of what will follow in the gospel narrative. It is no wonder that the authorities promptly took counsel about how to destroy Jesus. They rightly perceived that his transformative capacity—in subversive teaching and in revolutionary action—entailed the end of their dominance. Luke

clearly states the profound contradiction that Jesus' teaching and action provoked:

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard. (Luke 19:47–48)

One might imagine that the authorities judged that Jesus was conducting class warfare by making visible the contrast between the leaders and the crowd in order to invite the crowd into new social possibility. The crowd, positioned before established order, welcomed his alternative. Thus the subsequent charge against him was that he was “perverting the people” (Luke 23:14), talking them out of their allegiance to entrenched order. He is indeed a ruler of the impossible!

5. Jesus Invited Followers to Continue His Mission

Before he finishes, this wise, transformative “king” will summon his followers to continue his way of subversive astonishment and transformation in the world. He anticipates that his followers, the ones who sign on for his alternative regime, will be seen as troublemakers who will seek alternatives to conventional power arrangements. That discipleship, moreover, will be the cause of arrest and persecution. But Jesus assures his followers, according to Luke:

“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought

before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.” (Luke 21:12–15)

There cannot be any doubt that in this statement Luke has in purview the ongoing witness of the early church in the book of Acts. The apostles who witness to the transformative, life-giving power of Jesus are indeed called before the authorities. They, like Jesus, turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

Conclusion

It turns out that recognition of this new king is not just a Christmas Eve lark. It constitutes a new vocation. It is not only an acknowledgment of his new rule in the world but a recruitment for action congruent with the new regime. The “increase of his government” will not be by supernatural imposition or by royal fiat but only by the daily intentional engagement of his subjects, who are so astonished by his wonder that they no longer subscribe to the old order of power and truth that turns out to be, in the long run, only debilitating fraudulence. It requires an uncommon wisdom to interrupt the foolish practice of business as usual.

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