

“Divine Light *Beyond*”
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden
 Epiphany 1C (January 6, 2019)

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

In a Harvard Divinity Bulletin article more than ten years ago, Alex Kronemer tells a story about the pope and a well-known rabbi, who live in Rome in the Middle Ages.¹ “The Catholic community and the Jewish community aren’t getting along,” said the pope, so “I think it’s best if the Jews would just leave Rome.” After considering this, the rabbi had an idea. “Let me make a deal with you,” he said. “Let’s have a theological debate. If I should win, we get to stay. If I should lose, we’ll leave” The pope agreed to the terms, but realized there was a problem. “Which theological language, Hebrew or Latin, should the debate be in?” After discussing this, the two agreed “to have the debate nonverbally, using just hand gestures.” Word spread throughout the city of the debate between the pope and this well-known rabbi, and so “a wooden stage [was] built in St. Peter’s Square,” allowing the excited crowds to watch. “On the morning of the [silent] debate, the pope climb[ed] to the stage from one side and the rabbi from the other.” The pope began by holding up “three fingers.” The rabbi responded immediately by holding up one finger. The pope “nod[ded] thoughtfully, and then raised his hand making “a sweeping gesture over his head. Again, without a moment’s hesitation, the rabbi point[ed] firmly to the ground. Once more, the pope nod[ded] thoughtfully. He clearly [wa]s impressed. After a few moments of consideration, he turn[ed] to a table behind him on which he ha[d] placed the communion [bread] and [cup]. He pick[ed] them up and [held] them in front of the rabbi. For the first time, the rabbi seem[e]d stumped. He ponder[ed] for a moment, then shrug[ged], reache[d] into his cloak, and pull[ed] out an apple, at which point the pope raise[d] his hands in defeat. ‘The debate’s over,’ he declare[d]. ‘The rabbi wins. The Jews can stay in Rome.’ Down from the stage he [went, and was] immediately mobbed by [the clergy] who [were] there. ‘What was this debate all about?’ they ask[ed]. ‘Oh, it was a fascinating debate,’ he sa[id]. ‘First I put up three fingers to signify the Trinity. And the rabbi raised one to remind me that we all share one God in common. So I made a gesture over my head to say that God sits in majesty in the heavens above. And the rabbi pointed to the ground to remind me that God is [found] on earth So I took out the [cup] and the bread to signify salvation. And he took out the apple to remind me of the sin of Adam, which we all share in common.’ Meanwhile, the same conversation was happening with the rabbi and his followers. ‘What a weird debate,’ the rabbi said to his followers. They all nodded in agreement. ‘First, the pope puts up three fingers, saying that the Jews have to leave Rome in three days. So I put up one to say that not one of us is going to go. That made him mad, so he sweeps his hand over his head saying that the Jews had to leave Rome. I point to the ground, saying we’re staying right where we are. Then he signals that he wants to have a break by taking out his lunch!’ The rabbi shrugged. ‘So, naturally, I [took] out mine.’”

Alex Kronemer recounted this story one year after a Danish newspaper published a series of controversial cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, which ignited protests around the world among devout Muslims. Kronemer uses the story about the pope and the rabbi to make the following point: “If we take [the story] seriously for a second, something powerful is

¹ <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/autumn2007/white-hats-and-black-hats>

being said. When the pope puts up his three fingers, they clearly signify to him a beautiful, central theological idea in Christianity. Yet the rabbi has a completely different interpretation. To him they signify something sinister. And what the rabbi sees as merely food - the apple - the pope sees as the symbol for the fall of [humankind] from Paradise. The story, says Kronemer, suggests that maybe the differences between our many religions are really misunderstandings of the symbols we hold sacred.

He wrote those words nearly twelve years ago, but they're still relevant today - our day, when we're even more aware of religious diversity. "If one is curious about another religion [today]," writes scholar Diana Butler Bass, "most of us can [just] walk across the street."² Cross the street, or, we can look at the picture on CNN's website of the array of books used to swear in the new Congress. In that photo that went viral this week, there are sacred texts from many traditions: the Eastern Orthodox Bible; the Quran; the Jewish Tanakh; the Catholic Bible; the Hindu Vedas; the Buddhist Pali Canon; the U.S. Constitution is even in the picture, used to swear in the "atheists."³ "When we look around us at the amazing diversity of people," wrote members of the Celtic community in Northumbria, "we cannot help but realize that God is bigger than we think she is."

Yes, we can walk across the street or look at viral photos to encounter religious diversity; and most of us in the progressive religious movement will celebrate what we find and encounter; but our day is a day of paradoxes. The Anti-Defamation League reported last year that anti-Semitic hate crimes rose in 2017 by 57% across the country.⁴ *The New York Times* reported last week that Christian nationalists - intolerant, authoritarian, and patriarchal - are whispering in the ears of elected officials in the highest offices in our land.⁵ Back in November, Columbia Professor of Clinical Psychology, Elizabeth Midlarsky walked into her office and discovered swastikas and slurs spray-painted on her hallway walls.⁶ And just nine days before that incident at Columbia, three swastikas were found on Cornell's campus.⁷ Alex Kronemer and his story about a pope and a rabbi is trying to get us to think about religious differences as things to welcome instead of fear. It's an exhortation to understand and respect our different symbols instead of turning them into tools of hate.

There's good biblical precedent for such a view, and it comes from today's gospel reading in Matthew about the wise men from the east presenting gifts to the child Jesus. This story is an ecumenical story about people from far away lands and from different religions showing respect to a tiny child who was called the "King of Israel." We read this story about the wise men each year on Epiphany Sunday. The word "epiphany" comes from an old Greek word that means "manifestation" or "appearing." It's the day we celebrate the manifestation of divine light to all the nations, symbolized in astrologers - star gazers, "magi," as Matthew calls them - from the east bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh; or, as one child in a

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 244.

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⁴ https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/03/us/congress-swear-in-religious-books-trnd/index.html?utm_term=image&utm_content=2019-01-04T02%3A09%3A04&utm_source=twCNN&utm_medium=social

⁵ <https://www.adl.org/2017-impact-report/adls-audit-of-anti-semitic-incidents-reveals-the-scope-of-a-growing-threat>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/opinion/trump-evangelicals-cyrus-king.html>

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2018/11/29/they-got-me-im-afraid-swastikas-spray-painted-jewish-professors-office-columbia/?fbclid=IwAR2vdJG1K9m41bYDjRe_9sxj5FfkZvfYHs2oi9NZVgxpjdvrdFersj3dUVY&noredirect=on&utm_term=.92baa46bcedc

<https://cornellsun.com/2018/11/20/three-swastikas-in-9-days-spate-of-anti-semitic-incidents-on-north-campus-stokes-fear/>

Christmas pageant on YouTube put it: “Gold, *Frankenstein*, and Myrrh.” The gifts and the wise men have been interpreted in different ways throughout Christian history. Christian interpreters, drawing from Old Testament prophecies about kings bringing gifts - from Isaiah and from the Psalms, both of which we read earlier - have called the wise men “kings,” even though Matthew’s story never says they were royalty. Matthew calls them “magi,” “magicians” or, better, “astrologers.” Since about the year 500, Christian interpreters have viewed the three gifts as coming from three men, even giving the men names - Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar - but Matthew’s story is silent about how many wise men there were, and doesn’t give them names. There may have been dozens who brought gifts to Jesus on that first Epiphany. And the gifts themselves - gold, frankincense, myrrh; precious metal, incense, and anointing oil - have been interpreted as valuable gifts fit for a king and for the son of God. Third century Christian writer, Origen of Alexandria, said the gifts had spiritual meaning: gold was symbolic of kingship, he said; myrrh was symbolic of mortality as an oil to anoint the dead; and frankincense was symbolic of the incense burned to honor a god.⁸ Origen’s ancient interpretation has found its way into the lyrics of our hymn *We Three Kings*, which includes the words “Glorious now behold Him arise/King and God and sacrifice.” The gifts are valuable and precious, meant to honor a special child of a different religious tradition. Though, I think it’s fair to question just how useful such gifts may have been to a young family with a new baby. One person posted on Twitter that “after the three wise men left, three wise women showed up with [more practical] gifts of fresh diapers, casseroles for the week, and wine.”

The gifts the wise men bring are symbolic. They’re symbols - symbols in the way that Alex Kronemer in that story about the pope and the rabbi understands symbols. Symbols that celebrate and welcome religious difference. This epiphany story about wise men and gifts is a story about people from the east; people from far away lands; people from different religious traditions - the wise men were probably adherents of the Persian Zoroastrian religion; travelers, star-gazers following a star to Bethlehem and honoring a baby born into Judaism. It’s an epiphany story about divine light appearing, manifesting itself, shining *beyond*. *Beyond* the barriers of language and country and nation and religious identity. The magi story is an ecumenical story about east meeting west and coexisting in peace - magi of the Zoroastrian religion from the east paying homage to a young Jewish baby - a young Jewish baby who would grow up, and through his teaching, his way of life, his death on a cross, and his resurrection, plant the acorn that would become the oak tree of Christianity. In a single story - just twelve verses in Matthew’s gospel - we find Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity coming together, dwelling in peace, and looking for “epiphany” - for the “manifestation” and “appearance” of divine light across religious difference. Or, to quote those Celtic Christians from Northumbria again: “When we look around us at the amazing diversity of people, we cannot help but realize that God is bigger than we think she is.”

In 2017 Anjali Kumar gave a TED Talk about her personal search for God across religious difference.⁹ She called it her “mission to find God.” Kumar is culturally Hindu, but was raised in Jainism and attended a Catholic parochial school growing up. As an adult, she is one of the 56 million Americans without a religious affiliation - the “nones,” as the PEW Research Center calls them. Nearly 70% of nones believe there is a God, but aren’t sure who God is. Kumar set out on an Epiphany-like journey to find out. Her travels took her to a

⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I.60

⁹ https://www.ted.com/talks/anjali_kumar_my_failed_mission_to_find_god_and_what_i_found_instead?language=en

witch's potluck dinner at the LGBT Center in New York City; to Peru where she drank a five-gallon jerrican full of volcanic water with a shaman; to Mexico where she chanted for hours in a smoke-filled, heat-infused sweat lodge on a beach; to South Africa where she joined a laughing yoga group; to the Nevada desert seeking spiritual expression at the Burning Man festival; and she went to Brazil to meet a faith healer, who promised to spiritually connect her with saints and doctors to fix three things that she would like fixed.¹⁰ "In the weeks leading up to my trip to Brazil," says Kumar, "I mentioned my upcoming plans to some friends and to a couple of colleagues at Google, where I was a lawyer at the time. And I might have mentioned it to a couple more people because I'm chatty, including my neighbor, the guy who works at the local coffee shop I go to each morning, the checkout lady at Whole Foods and a stranger who sat next to me on the subway. I told each of them where I was going and why, and I offered to carry three wishes of theirs down to Brazil And to my surprise, my in-box overflowed. Friends told friends who told friends, and those friends apparently told more friends, other strangers and the guys at their coffee shops Virtually everyone [who emailed me] - the stranger on the subway, the guy at the coffee shop, the lawyer down the hall, the Jew, the atheist, the Muslim, the devout Catholic - all asked for essentially the same three things: ... health, happiness, love. ... When it came to happiness, ... they all asked for the ... kind of happiness that sinks in and sets down roots in your soul; the kind of happiness that could sustain us, even if we were to lose absolutely everything else. ... No one asked for answers to the big existential questions or for proof of God or the meaning of life like I had set out to find. ... Even when they could have asked for absolutely anything, they all asked for health, happiness and love. ... I find myself thinking about those emails every time I reflect back on the bias and prejudice that I've faced in my life, or when there's another hate crime or a senseless tragedy that underscores the disheartening sense that our differences might be insurmountable. I then remind myself that I have evidence that the humbling, unifying commonality of our humanity is that, even when presented with the opportunity to ask for anything at all, most of us want the same things, and that this is true no matter who we are, what name we call our god, or which religion, if any, we call home. ..."

Kumar concludes with this words: "in a world fractured by religious, ethnic, political, philosophical, and racial divides, even with all of our obvious differences, at the end of the day, and the most fundamental level, we are all the same."

We might call this story a modern Epiphany story. Amen.

¹⁰ The healer was John of God, who was just arrested in Brazil, but Kumar's visit took place several years ago: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-crime-faithhealer/brazilian-prosecutors-charge-healer-john-of-god-with-rape-sexual-assault-idUSKCN1OR1LJ>