

The glory of Epiphany

“It is arguably the least understood and least appreciated church season,” says Fleming Rutledge.

by [Timothy Jones](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

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Author and preacher Fleming Rutledge (courtesy of InterVarsity Press)

One of the first women ordained as a priest by the Episcopal Church, Fleming Rutledge is a renowned preacher and teacher. Her many books include the best-selling The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ. Her newest book, Epiphany: The Season of Glory, is part of InterVarsity Press's Fullness of Time series, which aims to make the liturgical calendar accessible to those who are unfamiliar with it.

You write that this book is “intended not for academic specialists, but for everyone: pastors, church musicians, teachers, worship leaders, students, inquirers, anyone at all who wants to deepen their understanding.” How might people from traditions that have neglected the church calendar benefit from engaging the ancients’ attention to Epiphany?

The rhythm of the seasons, the repeating sequence of observances year after year, the variety of the scripture readings, and especially the larger story the seasons tell us in narrative progression—all these elements of the very ancient liturgical calendar are powerful for Christian formation. Attentive participation in the story that the seasons tell will deepen commitment to the gospel, the church, and especially the church’s mission—a traditional theme of the Sundays after Epiphany.

Above all, the church year leads us to Jesus Christ. The sequence of seasons is designed so that the people of God can participate right now in the eternal dimension of the life of Christ. It’s not just a matter of customs and rituals. It’s designed around powerful experiences of the Lord’s living presence. This enables the members of Christ’s body to glorify him in his majesty as we follow him in our various vocations.

I’ve emphasized that the themes of the season of Epiphany, in particular, can be a strong antidote to a weak Christology. The mainline churches have drifted toward a tendency to neglect the apostolic message about the identity and destiny of the Messiah. Despite its beauty and depth and glory, Epiphany is arguably the least understood and least appreciated of all the seasons. I’m convinced it doesn’t have to be that way.

Your exploration of the season begins by focusing on the word *glory*. It is an expansive, vivid word, but why not start with a word more typically associated with Epiphany, like *presence* or *revealing* or *manifestation*?

With all respect for those other vitally important words, the word glory (doxa in Greek) is more exciting! It appears very often in the Epiphany Bible readings. In its context, it's more arresting and more specifically theological than the words you mention. "The glory of God" is one of the most frequent motifs in both the Old and the New Testaments: it appears in hundreds of verses. When the word glory is used in reference to humans (as it often is, in both ancient literature and contemporary settings), it means such things as fame, reputation, honor, adulation. These meanings of the word are ephemeral—like the faded glory of the pharaohs in Shelley's famous poem "Ozymandias." It may dominate in its day, but it inevitably fades. In contrast, the glory ascribed to God in scripture means a divine effulgence, or radiance, that is eternal because it is intrinsic to God's very self, independent from whatever the human response or lack thereof might be.

Epiphany in our current practice can be trivialized by a shallow focus on the Magi and the star over Bethlehem. But when the motifs of the season are more powerfully understood, the church gets an opportunity to focus for several weeks on the glory of God in Christ as the second person of the Trinity, the "glory as of the only Son from the Father" (as in John 1:14). And of course, when we think of Paul, who "glories in" the cross of Christ, we are pointed to what will happen next—in Lent and on Good Friday—the most contradictory and most earth-shattering depiction of glory that the world has ever known. Epiphany replaces minimalist, human-centered notions of glory with the real thing.

Your survey of epiphanies in the Bible accents how they elicit intense reactions: disbelief, awe, amazement, even "fear and trembling." You want us to go beyond "sentimental or superficial human ideas of glory." How can we experience Epiphany as more than quaint scenes of the Magi on a night journey under a star?

Many passages in scripture stress the transcendent nature of the glory of God and its unlikeness to anything comparable on earth. Karl Barth based his entire theological project on the conviction that knowledge of God is "grounded entirely in the miracle of grace." Epiphany demonstrates to us that there is no road to the glory of God through human seeking. It cannot be summoned by human endeavor. It comes as a pure gift and is revealed only from God's being, from God's will and self-revelation, for the salvation of his creatures. When the Epiphany readings (or any scripture readings) are understood through this lens, it changes everything. The glory of God is unfading and everlasting, but it has made itself known in God's pure

offering of his own self, through suffering.

In Matthew's Gospel, the advent of the infant king of the Jews is marked by peril and suffering. You write, "the birth of the baby Jesus was not simply a sweet occasion to be memorialized in peaceful nativity scenes." In times of unraveling, even deep sadness, how can Epiphany's ominous side end up giving us more hope, not less?

Look at the way that the evangelists portray Christ's life. The peaceful nativity scenes are quickly replaced by a story all too relevant to today, as the small child must flee with his parents as refugees from a murderous tyrant. The Son of God is a participant in human distress from the beginning, but he is delivered from such a premature death for the sake of his great mission. As he grows mature and enters his ministry, the king of the Jews meets immediately with direct opposition from the great adversary of God in various guises. As the 16th century Roman Catholic martyr Robert Southwell wrote in a poem that later became a Christmas carol, "This little babe, not three days old, is come to rifle Satan's fold." This is the eschatological dimension of the Jesus stories. Epiphany directs us to behold—that's a revelatory biblical word, behold—the glory of God in Christ as he moves through his time on earth with us through his death into his ultimate victory.

Each chapter of Epiphany focuses on an image (star, river, wine) that richly celebrates the incarnation. In your chapter on the transfiguration, you focus on the mountain. It's a scene of glory and majesty, but it's become a preaching trope to avoid lingering there. What happens when preachers and teachers neglect the story's high Christology?

Well, I don't really focus on the mountain specifically, but on the symbolism of it as the highest point on the landscape. It is of course linked to Sinai, and Moses appears with Elijah to represent the highest personages of the ancient Hebrew faith, now yielding to the new epiphany of the Son of God—so identified by the Father himself. People reading (or hearing) the account of the transfiguration on the last Sunday of Epiphany should be encouraged to submit themselves to the passage as its servants. The gospel writers intend the hearer to be struck by the force of what is being manifested in these events.

All too often, instead of focusing on Jesus' appearance in uncreated light and the voice of God the Father glorifying him, many preachers move on too quickly and

focus rather too enthusiastically on Peter, making him the stooge of the story, chiding him for his wish to stay on the mountain. Such a move, which I have heard from the pulpit on countless occasions, turns the radiant narrative into a pedantic lesson about letting go of mountaintop experiences and getting down to the valley of harsh reality. When the preacher does that, the scene loses its power and becomes mere exhortation—there's nothing to lift its hearers into a dimension where they might hear the voice of the Father and experience the manifestation of the glory of the Lord in the Son.

A great Epiphany hymn of the church speaks of how Christ, in the radiance of his majesty, “deigns to manifest” his glory as a promise to his followers, who will be brought with him into the joy of the perfect love that the Father shares with the Son. The transfiguration is a sign that those who put their trust in him will come to know his living, transfigured presence even now as a foretaste of Christ's final victory over what Paul identifies as the twin enemies of human flourishing: sin and death. Behold his glory!