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CHAPTER 1

PRESIDENTS AND KINGS

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.*

(Micah 5:2)

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born
in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East
came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child
who has been born king of the Jews? For we*

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observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

(Matthew 2:1-2)

Every four years, on the first Tuesday after November 1, America elects a president. On that day, we also elect all of the members of the House of Representatives and one-third of the Senate. It's an important day for our nation, but also one that highlights and exacerbates the deep divisions in our society. There will be victory speeches and concession speeches. One person will be the new “leader of the free world.”

Two years after the presidential election, the nation votes once more for the entire House and another one-third of the Senate in what is often seen as a referendum on the sitting president as well as the president's policies and party.

In each election, opposing candidates offer competing visions for our nation, conflicting solutions to our problems, and often divergent policies aimed at accomplishing these visions and solving these problems. Combined, they will spend \$1 billion or more to get elected. Meanwhile, political action committees will spend another billion, much of it seeking to cast aspersions on candidates they

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oppose. As much as we decry the polarization, many of us participate in it through our conversations and our use of social media.

Roughly three weeks after Election Day, Advent arrives and Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of their King.

This season puts into perspective all our political wrangling; whatever Christians think about their president, and whoever we voted for in the various elections, we are meant to know that there is only one King. It is to him we give our highest allegiance. While our politics have divided us, Advent should bring us together, uniting us around the newborn King and his life, message, ministry, death, and resurrection.

When I ponder our polarization, and the identity and call of Christ our King, I'm reminded of the words of John Wesley from the preface to his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*:

Would to God that all the party names, and unscriptural phrases and forms, which have divided the Christian world, were forgot; and that we might all agree to sit down together, as humble, loving disciples, at the feet of our common Master, to hear his word,

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to imbibe his Spirit, and to transcribe
his life in our own!¹

Advent beckons all who consider themselves Christians—regardless of whether they are Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, or Independents—to come to the stable and there fall on our knees as the shepherds surely did, yielding our allegiance, our hearts, and our will to the newborn King.

In this book, we'll seek to understand who this King is, why he came, and how we might, in Wesley's words, "transcribe his life in our own." In other words, we'll seek to understand the purpose of the Incarnation. We'll do that by considering words and titles used by the prophets, angels, shepherds, and Gospel writers to describe him. As we do, we'll seek to grow deeper in both our understanding of Jesus and our faith in him.

In this chapter, we'll begin by considering the *royal* titles used for Jesus found in the Christmas stories.

Christ/Messiah/King

Matthew begins his telling of the Christmas story with these words: "Now the birth of Jesus the *Messiah*

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took place in this way” (Matthew 1:18, emphasis added). In Luke’s account of the Christmas story, the angel announces Jesus’s birth to the shepherds: “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the *Messiah*, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11, emphasis added).

Messiah is an anglicized version of the Hebrew word *mashiach*. It literally means “anointed” (with oil) or “anointed one,” and it refers to an individual or object upon which special oil has been poured as a way of setting the object or person apart for God’s purposes. The earliest account in scripture of the use of oil to anoint people or things for God’s purposes is in Exodus 28-30. In Exodus 30:22-30, we read:

The LORD spoke to Moses: Take the finest spices: ... myrrh... cinnamon... cane... cassia... olive oil; and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil. With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand; you shall consecrate

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them, so that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy. You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, in order that they may serve me as priests.

This special oil was made to anoint the furnishings in the Tabernacle used in the worship of God, as well as the anointing of the priests and later the kings. Following this example, Bishop Ruben Saenz took anointing oil and anointed the altar, the baptismal font, and the pulpit at Church of the Resurrection when our congregation completed the central campus's sanctuary. Every time I stand behind the altar to pray over the bread and wine of the Eucharist, or baptize someone at the font, I can still see the oil mark on limestone where our bishop consecrated these items to God's service.

Centuries after the time of Moses, when Israel asked God to give her a human king, God had the prophet Samuel take oil to anoint a man named Saul. First Samuel 10:1 reads, "Samuel took a vial of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him; he said, 'The LORD has anointed you ruler over his people Israel. You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their enemies all around.'"

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From this time on, Israel's kings would be anointed by their prophets and priests. Like the priests and altar furnishings, the anointing of the king happened at God's direction and on God's behalf. It signified that the king was holy to God, set apart for God's purposes, ruling on behalf of God, representing God, and doing God's work.

It's interesting that in many countries, monarchs are still anointed with oil at their coronation. You can see the coronation of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II in video footage taken on June 2, 1953. But the anointing was considered so sacred that it was not allowed to be filmed. A canopy was brought in and held over the queen as the Archbishop of Canterbury poured holy anointing oil from the ampulla (or flask) into the golden coronation spoon. He then dipped his finger into the oil and anointed the queen's forehead, her upper chest, and her hands, consecrating her head, heart, and hands to God. As he did so he whispered, "As Solomon was anointed king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, so be you anointed, blessed, and consecrated Queen over the Peoples, whom the Lord thy God hath given thee to rule and govern."²

Anointing is a sign for the one being baptized, confirmed, or anointed at illness or death that they, too, belong to God, are holy and set apart for God, and that the Holy Spirit's presence is with them.

In the Christian faith, it is not just priests, queens, and kings that are anointed with oil. In many traditions, at baptism, the one being baptized is anointed with oil as a sign that this one belongs to God and is set apart for God's purposes. Many repeat this at confirmation, when the priest or pastor anoints the head of the confirmand with oil, praying for the Holy Spirit to work in and through the one being anointed. Christians also use oil to anoint the sick and the dying. James 5:14 refers to the practice of anointing the sick: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord." This anointing is a sign for the one being baptized, confirmed, or anointed at illness or death that they, too, belong to God, are

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holy and set apart for God, and that the Holy Spirit's presence is with them.

On the day I wrote these words, I went to visit my Aunt Carroll, who was dying of liver failure. At the end of our visit, I read scripture and then I opened the anointing oil I keep in a small vial on my keychain. I placed the oil on my thumb, and then slowly and deliberately made the sign of the cross upon my aunt's forehead before praying with her and giving her to God. I told her, "This oil is a sign that you belong to God, that you are God's child, and that sometime soon, he will return for you and welcome you into the kingdom of heaven." Oil is a powerful symbol both in scripture and in the Christian tradition.

Which takes me back to the kings of ancient Israel and Judah. Though prophets, priests, and holy furnishings were anointed, it is the role of king that became most closely associated with anointing in scripture. King Saul, King David, King Solomon, and those who followed after them were hailed as *messiah*—as the Lord's anointed. Among these ancient kings, one became the archetype for all future kings: David.

David: Israel's Archetypal King

David reigned as king from approximately 1010 BC to 970 BC. He was the eighth son of a man named Jesse, a shepherd in the small town of Bethlehem on the edge of the Judean wilderness. David was also the great-grandson of a woman named Ruth whose story appears in the biblical book that bears her name. God chose the youngest of Jesse's sons when he was just a boy (in his early teens, perhaps even younger). He was a shepherd, a poet, and musician, and a courageous young man who was described in 1 Samuel 16 as having a complexion that was "ruddy." It was also said that he "had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." Acts 13:22 tells us that God said of David, "I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes."

David's story is fascinating and looms large in the Bible. He is named over one thousand times in scripture, more often than anyone but Jesus. His story is told across four Old Testament books and a significant number of Psalms were either written by him, commissioned by him, or dedicated to him. He was the archetype (or ideal pattern) for all future

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kings of Israel. To this day, David is mentioned on street names, hotels, restaurants, and universities across the Holy Land. He was far from perfect, but God loved this man, showed him mercy upon mercy, and used him to shepherd his people.

In regards to David's offspring, God said to David, through Nathan the prophet:

I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

(2 Samuel 7:13b-16)

This became known as the Davidic Covenant—the promise that a descendant of David would rule over God's people *forever*. That promise had a profound impact upon the Jewish people, who found hope in it during long periods when they were living in exile or when foreign kings ruled over the land. During these times, the prophets recalled

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Nathan's promise and affirmed that, despite foreign rulers, the day would come when God would raise up a new king—like David—from David's royal line to rule as a shepherd over God's people.

Ezekiel 34:23-24 provides an example of this hope when the prophet writes, "I will set up over them [Israel] one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken." At this time, the Jews were living in exile in Babylon and David had been dead for four hundred years. Ezekiel wasn't promising that David would return from the dead. He was saying to the exiles that, against all odds, one day a new king, a descendant of David, would rule over God's people once again.

This hope for an ideal king, like David, is what became known as the "messianic hope." The prophets often spoke of this new idealized Davidic king, and even before the Babylonian exile, when David's descendants still reigned in Jerusalem, it shaped their hopes for the ruler. At times, when a crown prince was born, the prophets might offer their visions of what this child would become one

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day. When a new king was crowned, exuberant hopes for his reign would be uttered by the prophets. There was a longing on the part of the prophets and many of the people for a king from David's royal bloodline who would reign with justice and righteousness. An example of this hope is found in the well-known and much-loved verses of Isaiah 9:6-7:

*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.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

Many interpreters think that Isaiah was using these lofty titles to celebrate the birth of a newborn crown prince around 732 BC, or possibly the coronation of King Hezekiah around 727 BC. This is likely the case, yet with these royal titles, the prophet paints a picture of a king which could never

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be completely fulfilled by the crown prince or King Hezekiah. Which of these could truly be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace? What earthly king could possibly usher in endless peace forevermore? Hence the words, though given in the context of the birth or coronation of a prince or king in the eighth century before Christ, remained an unfulfilled hope or promise that each successive generation of Jews looked to and built upon, as they imagined and longed for a future king.

Seven hundred years after the time of Isaiah, the Jewish people were yearning for just such a king. Herod the Great ruled over the land, but he was no just and righteous king from David's royal line. And even he ruled only at the pleasure of an even greater king, the emperor in Rome. It was in this context of a deep longing on the part of many for the Messiah to come that the angel Gabriel appeared to young Mary in Nazareth, saying:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give

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to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

(Luke 1:30-33)

There, in the midst of the angel's annunciation to Mary, was the old promise given by God to David through Nathan, that a descendant of David would rule forever. And this child was one of whom Isaiah's royal titles could rightly be used.

Matthew begins his account of Christmas with these words: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way” (Matthew 1:18). Matthew and Luke want us to know, from the start, that the child whose story they will tell is *the* Anointed One, the long-promised Messiah, the Christ, the Davidic King.

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Presidential elections are focal points of power and wealth. The elections of 2020 were anticipated to be the costliest presidential elections to date. At one point, three of the candidates running for president were billionaires, though two eventually bowed out. Early estimates were that over \$2 billion would be spent trying to win the race. The winner

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of such an election will be inaugurated on the western steps of the US Capitol with thousands of people looking on. Following the inauguration, the president will enjoy the inaugural balls with great food, wine, and dancing. He will live in the White House with a crack security team to protect him and his family. He will become not only the “leader of the free world” but the Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful military on the planet.

Contrast that with the King whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. He was born in a stable, with an animal’s feeding trough for his bed. He grew up in the obscure village of Nazareth in the first-century Jewish equivalent of “the other side of the tracks.” Far from billionaire status, he was trained at making tools and farm implements, doors, and furniture, and likely was skilled as a handyman.*

At the age of thirty, Jesus began his campaign for the office of King. He traveled from town to town, giving various stump speeches about the kingdom of God. In these campaign speeches, he called

* The Greek word *tekton* is usually translated as “carpenter,” but in an era and place where homes were made of stone or mud brick and built by masons, carpenters worked with wood. They focused on farm implements, doors, shutters, furniture, and whatever else might be made of wood. They could also be what today we’d call a “handyman.”

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people to love God, their neighbors, and even their enemies. He called his hearers to humility, kindness, integrity, forgiveness, and selflessness. He asked them to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, and the immigrant. He decried arrogance and hypocrisy.

His campaign's finance team was a group of people, mostly women, who traveled with his twelve disciples and provided support for his work. The disciples made up the bulk of his campaign staff, but they had never run a campaign before. They were fishermen, a tax collector, and a group of others who had little education—a group some might describe as misfits and ragamuffins—hardly a team most reasonable people would assemble for such an important task.

His campaign trail took him through “all the cities and villages” where he could be found “teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness.” As he looked at the people, “he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:35-36).

It may seem a stretch to think of Jesus as on a campaign trail, but I think this is how his disciples

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must have seen his work. They anticipated that at some point in the future he would be installed as king and they would rule with him. Each stop was building support for his reign. He had dinners with leaders. He spoke at huge gatherings with thousands of people. He was constantly talking about his vision, a vision he referred to as the kingdom of God.

Yet, in so many ways, Jesus went about his campaign all wrong—if we're judging by the standards we're used to today. Many of the people wanted a king who would raise an army to push the Romans out of the land—"peace through strength." Jesus instead called his fellow Jews to love the Romans and any other enemies they had. While presidential candidates often court the endorsements of the rich and powerful, Jesus alienated the powerful and influential, and instead associated with the poor and powerless; in the words of Garth Brooks, Jesus had "friends in low places."

Jesus made very few campaign promises—nothing about lower taxes or increased jobs or defeating the Romans. He didn't promise to make Israel a great nation once again. Instead, he spoke about welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick (see the parables of the good Samaritan and the sheep and

LEARN THE MEANING BEHIND
THE NAMES OF CHRIST AND THE
DIFFERENCE HE MAKES IN OUR
LIVES THIS CHRISTMAS.

His parents gave him the name Jesus. But the prophets, the shepherds, the wise men, and angels addressed him by other names. They called him Lord, Messiah, Savior, Emmanuel, Light of the world, and Word Made Flesh.

In *Incarnation*, best-selling author Adam Hamilton explores the meaning of these titles and what they tell us about the child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. Join him and reflect upon the significance of the Christ-child for our lives and world today!



ADAM HAMILTON is senior pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, one of the fastest growing, most highly visible churches in the country. *The Church Report* named Hamilton's congregation the most influential mainline church in America, and he preached at the National Prayer Service as part of the presidential inauguration festivities in 2013. Hamilton is the best-selling and award-winning author of *The Call*, *Making Sense of the Bible*, *Love to Stay*, *The Journey*, *The Way*, *24 Hours That Changed the World*, *Revival*, *Not a Silent Night*, *Enough*, *When Christians Get It Wrong*, *Creed*, *Moses*, *Unafraid*, *Christianity and World Religions*, *Simon Peter*, and *The Walk*.

 **Abingdon Press™**

www.abingdonpress.com

Cover Design: Marc Whitaker /MTWdesign.net

RELIGION / Holidays / Christmas & Advent \$19.99

ISBN-13: 978-1-7910-0554-2



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