

Story and Meditation: What Child is This?

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Matthew 2:1-12

John 1:1-18

by Eric Anderson

The urgent summons went out around the ohī'a forest. Lost child! Lost child! Lost child! Mothers sped from their nests whether they had a fledgling missing or not. Fathers sped to the nest to keep watch over the hatchlings. 'Apapane, i'iwi, 'elepaio, 'akepa, oma'o, 'amakihi – nearly every one of the small birds of the forest – raced to the source of the call. A young bird had been lost. It might be one from their nests, or a relative's nest, or a complete stranger's nest. It didn't matter. The call went out, and the mothers flew to help.

It was one of the 'amakihi who had raised the alarm. She perched on a low branch over an... egg.

This sort of thing didn't happen very often, but it did happen. Rain and wind could weaken a nest to the point where an egg slipped out. Usually that was the end of it, I'm afraid. Eggs don't generally do well after falling from a tree. This egg, however, rested on a particularly soft spot, and somehow it was whole. The birds gathered in astonishment. None of them could remember a lost egg before.

"Whose egg is it?" asked the 'amakihi who had found it. "Who is missing an egg?"

None of the mothers present thought they were missing an egg – several of them were tending to chicks who had already hatched, in fact – but a number of them weren't entirely sure. The alarm had sounded early in the day, before most of them were properly awake. They needed to check.

The mothers who weren't sure flew back to their nests while the other birds, nearly all of them mothers whose eggs had already hatched, watched the mysterious egg and kept an eye out for other creatures who might want to eat it for breakfast. It took some time, but eventually all the mothers had made the flight to their nest and returned. Not a single one was missing an egg.

This had never happened before. Missing chicks had always been returned to their families. But an egg that nobody believed was theirs? What to do?

"What kind of egg is it?" asked one of the 'apapane.

They looked it over, but there are a lot of birds who lay eggs that look much the same in the ohī'a forest. Try as they might, they couldn't say for sure what kind of bird would hatch from it, let alone who its family might be.

"How can we figure out what kind of egg it is?" asked an 'akepa.

"I can only think of one way," said the 'amakihi who had found the egg in the first place. "We'll have to wait until it hatches."

So that's what they did. They set up a rotation so that 'apapane followed 'elepaio followed l'iwi followed 'amakihi and so on. They made sure that no mother would have to stay away from her nest for too long. Each one tending the egg had company from one of the fathers, since being on the ground made everybody nervous.

Because they were right, you know. The only true way to learn what the chick inside an egg will become is to see what it is when it hatches, and see what it becomes as it grows.

Two thousand or so years ago, a small group of philosopher/astrologer/astronomers, probably Persians, decided that they knew enough about the possibilities of a child that they had to come see. Jesus, of course, had been born, not hatched, and he was still far too small for anyone other than a prophet or an angel to envision his future, but the sign of a star had persuaded them that they wanted to see whatever there was to see. They made their way first to Jerusalem, clearly expecting that the newborn was a child of King Herod.

When they found Jesus, what did they think they were seeing? What child was this? Matthew left that a little vague. At the very least they seem to have believed Jesus to be the royal heir – which was rather awkward given that they just met the current ruler whose child Jesus... wasn't. I doubt they needed a lot of persuading to go home without returning to Jerusalem.

What child is this? An infant pretender to the throne occupied by a man noted for his ruthlessness. That was probably all they ever would know of the child they made their journey to see.

What child is this? King Herod, it seems, entertained the possibility that he might be the Messiah. A Messiah meant a rebellion, a rebellion against Herod himself and against the Roman Empire that maintained his power and position.

What child is this? Matthew never saw Jesus at all – neither his gospel nor any of the others claim to be written by an eyewitness, and they don't sound like they were written by eyewitnesses, either. No, Matthew never saw Jesus, but he knew more of Jesus' life story than the philosopher/astronomers from Persia did. For Matthew, what child is this certainly included words like Messiah and royal, but he was also was part of the new Jesus-follower movement that was reworking the notion of Messiah in light of Jesus, rather than the other way around.

The political and military leader Herod had feared – and that Pontius Pilate had feared – did not materialize in this child. Jesus took a completely different approach to the idea of a Messiah. Instead of delivering the people from their political overlords, Jesus undertook to deliver them from their theological and spiritual burdens. In writing his book, Matthew emphasized Jesus' words and actions but he also tied in Scripture that had been used to understand the political Messiah. One of those texts was, of course, the reference to Bethlehem in the prophet Micah.

What child is this? A new kind of deliverer.

John wrote his gospel after Matthew, but if he had read it there's really no sign. If John had read or heard any of the stories about Jesus' birth, he ignored them. He didn't go back to the prophet Micah as Matthew did. Instead, he recalled the figure of Wisdom from Proverbs, who had been present with God at the Creation, and combined that idea with a Greek philosophical idea about the power of the Word. Crafted in a poetry that has sung down the centuries, he set down these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

What child is this? Why it is the Wisdom of God, the Word of God. This child is God.

As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "The light shines—present tense. While the incarnation was the eternal entering into the temporal, God's presence in a particular body in bounded and limited time, the meaning of our God becoming flesh is timeless and forever. Our embodied lives are inextricably connected to the divine's human experience. And the divinity of God is indissolubly linked to our lived daily lives—'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10)."

Well. What child is this?

I have to go back to that unbroken egg on the floor of the oh'i'a forest. To some degree, we can never fully know what child this is, because there is always some of the eggshell keeping at least some things unseen. We know more than the magi, however, and we know considerably more than Herod. Matthew and John probably knew more than they wrote – John actually admitted that in his book – but neither of them had the other's book. So do we know more, or one of them? I can't say for sure.

What I do know is that the question "What child is this?" is one that has had many answers. It is one that Christians ask and answer not once in a generation, nor once in a lifetime, but over and over again. We learn new things from the Gospels, and we gain new understandings from our ongoing relationship with Jesus.

What child is this?

It's Jesus who loves us.

Amen.