January 6, Epiphany of the Lord (Matthew 2:1–12)

Genealogies suggest a beautiful inevitability even amid political impossibility.

by Mihee Kim-Kort in the January 1, 2020 issue

When I was in high school, my paternal grandparents came from South Korea for their first visit to the United States. I hadn't seen them since I was eight years old. One evening after dinner, my grandfather sat us down and pulled out a large, black book. He opened it, carefully turned the pages, and explained how he had spent years compiling the names of all those in our family tree. The book included photographs, drawings, and maps that described our lineage, beginning with Kim Su Roh in AD 42 and going through 74 generations. I remember being struck by the truth that we are shaped not by our own ambitions, accomplishments, or even legacies but by our histories, by the people who came before us. And all this is marked by structures of time.

It is significant that Matthew begins his Gospel with a genealogy. While the revelation of God in Jesus Christ often focuses on the resurrection, Matthew's focus is firmly rooted in Jesus' roots—in the relationships between ancestors and descendants, making explicit the straight line from Jesus to both familiar characters and less familiar ones: "The generations from Abraham to King David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations" (1:17).

Matthew incorporates time in particular ways. Certainly it serves as a legitimizing background for his narrative. But Jesus' lineage, like my grandfather's, is more than a ledger of names. The writer grounds this witness in an invocation of places, events, images, and teachings—even prophecies, hopes, and dreams. Jesus—the Son of God, the Son of David, the Son of man, the Messiah—does not materialize out of thin air; he is the result of generations. And the plot thickens when Mary enters

the scene, full of grace, blessed among women. Suddenly, we get a dramatic testimony of the miraculous arrival of Emmanuel.

This week's lectionary passage begins with the words, "In the time of King Herod." These words launch the familiar story of the Magi and their search for the infant king, inspired by their exploration of the night sky. The story includes their encounter with Herod's dubious enthusiasm to join their search and the culmination of their journey with beautiful gifts offered to the holy child. Imagine the awe and wonder at the arrival of these unique guests from the East. The whole scene appears idyllic—but we know the situation around the baby Jesus remains ever more uncertain and perilous, as eventually the astronomers themselves are warned in a dream. Why? Because Jesus is born "in the time of King Herod."

These six words are more than a temporal marker. They highlight the specific cultural, social, and political climate, a kind of anti-*kairos*, behind the reactionary way the status quo recognizes the potential rupture signaled by Jesus' birth: "When King Herod heard [the message from the Magi], he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." The phrase "in the time of King Herod" indicates that these powers and principalities are ever ready to annihilate any glimmer of God's salvation at hand.

But it also gestures toward the immanent fulfillment of God's purpose—God's kingdom represented in this newborn, who embodies a steadfast resistance to such systems of violence. During this particular time and space, in "Bethlehem of Judea," we see how God's promise has been written right into the story from the beginning, from generations that preceded this moment. Even "in the time of King Herod," when it seems impossible and precarious—with all of creation yearning, groaning under many years of oppression from an unyielding empire—the entrance of Jesus into the world activates reverberations felt by people thousands of miles away who are simply attending to the choreography of stars and planets.

We can't read "in the time of King Herod" without recognizing how the genealogies suggest a beautiful inevitability even in the midst of a political impossibility. In other words, God will do this work no matter what, and God will invite anyone to participate in it—a young woman, a stepfather, night-shift workers, foreign scientists, fishermen, sex workers. God began this work with the strangest and most marginalized characters, some of whom are even named in the genealogies—Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, the wife of Uriah.

Family trees are wider than they often present themselves to be. In my own family's document, women were identified only by their surnames. So when my grandfather wanted to do something radical to express his love for his two granddaughters, he wrote my name and my female cousin's name into the lineage—the only two women whose full names are included there. There is beauty and hope in the naming, an expression of our ancestors' dreams. In all these lineages we read between the lines, too, and we see that it isn't just blood that ties us together. It isn't just reproduction or tradition or the linear march of time that makes us, although these things can mark us. What engrafts us—what writes us into and onto one another—is that longing that carries us through every generation.