

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and today you're listening to Percolating on Faith where we talk about all kinds of matters of theology and faith and all kinds of good stuff. I'm here with of course, your favorite guests, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:51

I Carla. Always a delight.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:53

Hi, Carla. Good to be here.

Carla Long 00:55

Always. Aren't I just delightful every time.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:58

We think so. What's going up, Carla?

Carla Long 01:01

So today, we're gonna be talking about Epiphany, which happens around January 6, January 7. And before I started studying theology and stuff, I really didn't even know much about what happened around January 6, January 7. As soon as Christmas is over on December 25 at noon, we're taking down our Christmas tree. My mom never let us leave that Christmas tree up like she was over it. Like Christmas is over the season is over. Let's move on. And then I became the Mission Center Financial Officer for Western and Eastern Europe. And I got an email from one of our workers there. And she said, just so you know, we'll be taking January 6 and seventh off because it's Christmas. Luckily, I didn't write back. No, it's not stop trying to take days off. I looked it up. And of course, it is a Christmas for the Orthodox Church. So there's a lot of stuff happening around January 6, January 7th In the Christian calendar. And I think it's cool that we're talking about it, because I don't know how many people know about it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:56

Yeah, yeah. Good point. Yeah. A cool thing you might not know, is that in the ancient church, Christmas was a late comer. But Epiphany was there already in the Fourth Century, and it was considered a major feast.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:09

So yeah, the three major feasts were Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, and Pentecost. And at the very earliest church, those were the three that really mattered. And Christmas was way down the road before it started featuring as a major one. So I think in some ways, it may have taken advantage of Epiphany, actually.

Carla Long 02:36

Christmas kind of hijacked a lot of stuff. Really?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:39

Yeah. But I mean, like, over time, we'll talk about this a little over time, right? In Western Christianity, Christmas became the Queen Mother, and Epiphany got shunted to a single day, in January 6, although, originally, it was considered far more important feast day than Christmas,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:56

Right. And still, for some January, the sixth Epiphany is seen as the end of the Christmas season. But we'll kind of start with what it's normally seen as today. And usually, when we're talking about Epiphany, at least in Protestant and Catholic, the Western Church, you'll hear about the wise men, this is the coming of the wise men, to worship Jesus. And so what's being celebrated there is these people who are not Jewish, these outsiders, these people who see the world in a different way. But they are aware of who Jesus is, is something unique and special. And so it's kind of cool, because this is only in the Gospel of Matthew, where the wise men show up. It's kind of cool, because, as in the Gospel of Mark, it's not completely apparent who this baby is who this Jesus is. In Mark, you don't know who Jesus is, until his crucifixion. But here in Matthew, there are some people who have a pretty good idea who Jesus is, and they come and they worship Him. But these are not Jews. These are not people who even know about the Jewish Messiah promise—none of that. And so it's kind of cool, because it's like, what God is doing in the world is recognized by some people, but they might not be the insiders. They might not be the people than anyone expected. So they are the first witnesses of who Jesus really is. So that's part of the idea of Epiphany, and Epiphany, meaning manifestation, or I like better because I think manifestation is a big word. How do you use it in a sentence kind of thing. And I would say revealing, revealing something of what God is doing in Christ. And so that's what we typically think of today when we think of Epiphany.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:54

Because I like things Greek as Carla knows. That word epipháneia, in Greek It comes from the Greek verb final, which means to show. So epipháneia would be an intensified verb to really show, right. So the really, really, really show really show. So the epiphany is showing, the revealing, the manifesting of who Jesus is, for all the world. So that's what the word means. And we use epiphany in modern English to say, like a light went on, right? I had an epiphany, which is interesting way to think of it because because actually, we'll discover as we go along that light is one of the symbols that is typically associated with the Christian holiday or holy day of Epiphany. So yeah, so that's a little bit about the word. And we probably should just give you a very short version of that complicated story of this feast day. In liturgics, we use the term feast day for these special days that have been set apart in the Christian calendar.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:57

And I think one of the easiest ways of approaching all the different variations there were in the earlier church, about what Epiphany was and stood for, is to say that all of the things they attached to it had something to do with revealing who Christ is, as either God's incarnation, as God with us, things that say something about who Jesus is in God. So there are times in the earlier centuries, Epiphany, starting to be recognized by the fourth century, and..

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:31

Definitely recognized by the fourth century is the three hundreds, you know, sometimes we have trouble with the fourth century equals three hundreds and not four hundreds. But already in the third century, there's evidence that some Christian groups were doing something related to the celebration of the commemoration of Jesus baptism, early in January. And that's where this data comes from.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:50

So there's some places where Epiphany meant celebrating Jesus' baptism. Others, it was about celebrating Jesus' birth. For others, there's a sense of the idea of the Trinity being revealed in who Jesus was. So all of these different meanings to it. And sometimes they even combine them. So it's like, okay, Epiphany is celebrating both Jesus' baptism and his birth, or it's celebrating the wise men and his baptism. So it was like, We need to celebrate something. January, January, definitely needs a holiday.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:30

And it's interesting that it's in January, because if you think about it in the northern hemisphere, by the time you get to January 6, the days are just starting to get a little longer. So before there were Christian festivals, at that time of year, there were pagan festivals that were celebrating the slow return of light, right. And so one should not be worried that Christians took over a pagan festival, that's a ridiculous thing to worry about. We have borrowed stuff from other people and given our own spin on it. And so also one other things sometimes in some ancient Christian traditions, Epiphany was the day they focused on the miracle at Cana, too, the turning of water into wine. Because it's the first miracle in the Gospel of John, right. So it's another revelation or manifestation of who he is. Yeah, lots of meanings attached to this day,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:14

And then kind of different meanings in the Western Church from the Eastern Church. And here Western church would be the Latin Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Protestantism, which comes out of that. And the Eastern Church, which is all of the Eastern Orthodox churches, whether that's

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:30

Well now like, like Greek Orthodox, or Bulgarian Orthodox, that they're all separated and

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:35

All of those, but they tend to go with the later calendar too. So that's why Christmas for them, is January the seventh. And so the sixth right next to it like that, is a... two celebrations right next to each

other. And again, the sixth may get kind of a little overshadowed by the seventh, but still the idea of the revealing aspects of who Jesus is and revealing of God in Jesus. And go ahead.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:03

Just a side note on that is that the idea of the 12 days of Christmas, which is important, especially in Christian traditions that trace themselves back to England. Right. So that's most of American Protestantism in some way or another. Where the 12 days of Christmas start on Christmas Day. And then 12th night is January 5th in the evening. And then January 6th is 12th day. And so that whole thing is called Christmastide. Right? So if you thought you were tired of eating on Christmas Day, Carla, if we celebrated it properly, we would be feasting for a long time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:42

Well, and just very interesting. You talked about your mom wanting that tree down like right now, there actually are some cultures, I think in Eastern Europe where you don't leave the tree up beyond many days after Christmas because it's bad luck if you leave it up too long. Probably because it'll burn your house down. But but that was I just thought about what your mom's practice there.

Carla Long 10:06

There's two things I want to say. One, I will never be tired of feasting, and two, mom wanted that tree down because she wanted her living room back. And I'm pretty sure it would have been bad luck for all of us had we left that tree up. So that's actually true. Go ahead, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:20

So what if you told mom, not only are we going to leave the tree up, but we're not going to put them wise men in the little nativity until January 6th, and they're going to hang around for a little while. So I'm really happy, right?

Carla Long 10:33

My mother would never handle that well. Never. I love her. I love her to bits. But no, no, that does not work in the Long household.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:40

So what we have here then is a Christian feast day, that had multiple meanings in different parts of the ancient world, Western meanings, Eastern meanings. And one thing we know is that definitely by the year 400, December 25th, for the Western Church had become Christmas Day. And then January 6th, has become Epiphany. We know that was pretty much settled for the Western Church by then. The Eastern Church kept the January 6 date for Epiphany. But then, as it stayed on the Julian calendar, it made January 7, the actual Christmas Day so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:40

Wise.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:11

And I think one of the things we need to remember, and this is true in Judaism, as well as in Christianity, especially when in time periods where most people were not educated. The festivals were the way of telling the story, or the way of reminding people, what is the story of Jesus, who is this God. And so, applying the important parts of the stories to these festivals, was really strategic, in helping people to learn, especially who is Jesus in relation to God. And almost all of these festivals are specifically focused on some aspect of Christ revealing God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:55

So we basically covered the very brief history of Epiphany and the basic meanings, probably what's important for us to do is to refocus then on the primary Western meaning, which is to go back to the Magi story in Matthew, and just reinvestigate it very briefly, and then want to talk about some images and symbols connected to Epiphany. And then we'll change gears and go into spiritual formation questions connected to Epiphany. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:18

I think first is just rehearsing the story. The idea being in Gospel of Matthew, that at Jesus birth, a star is seen by...

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:30

Our word magic comes from that word, but amambus or the Magoi in Greek, were a cast of astrologers, and in the ancient world, astrology and astronomy were kind of the same thing. And typically, originally they were of Persian origin. Right? So think the distant ancestors of Iranians. And then the Gospel of Matthew, these, these Magoi are not numbered. It says, Magoi from the East came,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:58

It's not number.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:01

So Carla, not only are we going to leave the Nativity up in your mom's living room for a long time, we're going to add dozens and dozens of wise men.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:08

Well, maybe not dozens.

Carla Long 13:11

Do they even matter if they don't bring presents? I mean, really, who wants to remember someone who doesn't even bring a present honestly,

Carla Long 13:16

It's a good road trip though, you know,

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:18

Sometime in the third century, the Christian Bible scholar origin of Alexandria, and later Ceasarea, he moved. He's the one who came up with that there were three because of the three gifts, but the text doesn't say it says three gifts, right? But it doesn't say there were three, Magoi.

Carla Long 13:18

A good road trip.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:34

Right? So and it's somewhere like in the ninth century, or later, where people give names to the three of them, but they're not based in the biblical story. So here are these people who know how to read the skies. Basically, that's part of their religion. And their background is they read what's happening in the heavens. And so they see a star. And they know that this is auspicious, that it means that someone important, has been born. And so they begin their travel, and it probably would have taken months months. So if the star is only seen, when Jesus is born, if it only appears, then Jesus is going to be pretty old. He's going to be maybe as much as a year old by the time the Magi arrive. And so you'll often see it pictured as Jesus like a toddler when the Magi arrived not still in the manger in swaddling clothes, because I just wouldn't put up with it by this point.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:35

And of course, the story of Matthew, when the Magi show up in Jerusalem and say, Alright, we're looking for the sky and Herod the Great who was a miserable rotten person. When Herod the Great hears that of course, he's jealous and concern. And so Herod orders to slaughter infants is all the infants two years old and younger. So, in Bethlehem in Bethlehem, right? So to you use the traditional names Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasaras Excellent Adventure might have taken them a long time to get from the Far East, to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. So, so that's part of the story then in Matthew.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:13

And so they arrive, and they bring these over the top gifts, frankincense, myrrh, and gold. And whether Jesus' parents were very poor peasantry, or even if they were seen as craftsmen, and kind of higher up the social ladder, these were pretty astounding gifts to come because of their child's birth. It's like somebody arriving at your door with a new car, you know, because you just had a baby, a bit of a surprise.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:50

So in Matthew's Gospel, it's very interesting. They present the gifts and it says, the NRSV translates, they do obeisance to the child and the Greek word *ypoklínontai sto gónato* means they bow on the knee. But this word also it can be translated worship. And some older translations will do that. And it seems like it's the proper word here. Because it's the exact same word that is used several times in Matthew, when the disciples bow the knee, they worship Him. And it's also used at the very end of the gospel and chapter 28, when the risen Christ appears to the eleven. It says, When Jesus, they worshipped him, and some doubt at same word. And Matthew loves these bookends, right? So you've got Gentile Magi at the start of the gospel, worshipping at the end of the gospel, you've got disciples

worshipping, who are about to be sent to the Gentiles. So it's a nice bookend to the whole story. They worship the child, and they are outsiders. They are not Jewish, they are not part of the covenant. They are Gentiles. And they are star god watchers, right? So they're not even, you can't even refer to them as monotheists, they have picked up that something wonderful has happened, and they want to honor it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:05

And in Matthew, this is seen as an act of God of God being recognized, both in the star that they follow, and then in Christ himself. So it's, it's one of those themes in Matthew, that what God is doing in Christ is not just for Gentiles, not just for Jews, it's for everyone. So that comes through very, very well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:30

So some images and symbols connected with epiphany, the primary ones first of all, would be light connected to the star. And in some of these ancient Christian traditions, epiphany is called day of the lights. So that's a lovely term for it's, it's a festival that celebrates light.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:48

in the northern hemisphere is that's particularly meaningful after the darkest days of the year.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:54

Another symbol connected with Epiphany is water. And that's because the Eastern tradition still celebrates Christ's baptism on that day. And in some Eastern traditions, the baptismal water is blessed on that day, too. So water is an important symbol for Epiphany. So you've got light and water. And then of course, gifts and gift giving. The Magi has gifts. I mean, that's certainly part of the festival, though, we've obviously thrown that back onto Christmas day in the Western tradition, but so those are key symbols of the day and light, water, things that give life you know, that's part of what's being symbolized here at Epiphany,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:33

I imagine that, like a bishop could do something with January 6, as far as the gift giving, you know, because we tended to make the gift giving all about giving gifts to each other. But in effect, the Magi are giving gifts to God, too. And so there should be a really good offertory for the Sunday closest to Epiphany.

Carla Long 18:58

I realize you're being a little bit facetious, but I'm listening hard, just so you know.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:04

The ideal opportunity, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:06

Actually Carla, we're also being directive.

Carla Long 19:10

So I'm really taking notes right now.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:13

It's easy to stay narrow viewed on these things. But what if we back out and take the broader view? The Magi are symbolic of immigrants. And refugees. By the way, Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, infants are going to be refugees right away as soon as the Magi are gone,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:29

Because God letd them know that Herod is going to try and kill the child and, and again, the wise men, the Magi also have a dream that tells them to not go back and let Herald know where this baby is. And again, so God is at work with people who are not within this religious tradition. So I think that again, is the people who are traveling people who are are not from these parts. So that's things to think about.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:56

Also, the Magi embody in some ways the idea of with single quotes around it that it's the outsiders who really get it. Because we who are deeply immersed in church life often know that we insiders don't get it. But the outsiders sometimes do get it. And so these Magi symbolize wise and discerning outsiders who really understand. A great example in the 20th century Gandhi, right Gandhi, who really understood the Sermon on the Mount better than lots of Christians did, and was able to blend it with his own Hindu traditions for his work in India. So sometimes the outsiders have better lenses for seeing what the stays the story is about.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:34

They can see the big picture. And that's certainly what was happening here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:38

And then what if we say, oh, you know, water is such an important symbol in Epiphany, but gracious of baptism, yeah, for baptism, Jesus baptism and the blessing of water and so on, in Eastern traditions, but water is an endangered resource in some ways for us. What if Epiphany also recalls us to care for water, and to stewardship of the preciousness and sacredness of water. So there's a larger meaning connected here. For goodness sakes, the incarnate one God the Word, enfleshed as Jesus of Nazareth is born. So there's water, he is baptized, so there's water, right? And then wash his feet at the end of his life. So there's water. So we have some Ecotheology to learn from, you know, Epiphany can can teach us some Ecotheology is what I'm trying to say

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:24

it's connected with that. So how does Epiphany or how can it lead us into conversation with God today? And so if that's just the place, we want it to go with it? So if we go with the Magi, with that being the focus of Epiphany, then some questions we might ask ourselves would be, who is the unexpected other who are bringing gifts into my life? Who is bringing that which reveals God, the God of the whole world? Those are a couple of ways of saying, what did the Wisemen bring us? And in the form of questions, and then where is wisdom before me that I've not recognized or acknowledged because of who it came from? So that's another place to go quite often we don't listen to children and youth. And they often see

things in ways we cannot, that we who've been around for a while, and are embedded in our lives, cannot see. Another question: The Wisemenn's presence meant that in some ways, Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus were in danger. And they knew, it's in Matthew, it's Joseph, who gets the visions and hears from angels and things like that, but who are those in danger in our time, who are those who must be on the road in order to live. And again, we go back to asylum seekers, and immigrants and refugees. Then what unexpected person makes God's work in the world real invisible. Each day, who is making God's compassion, real. And around Christmas is a time when we may see more than other times where people are open to the Spirit of care for each other, especially those who most need care and who are most invisible. But that's a good question to ask us. And new to our world, when we are open to where else God might be at work. So not just within our own denomination or religious atmosphere, but who else might know things and have experienced things that will help us to know God better?

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:54

If we were to go with the birth or baptism of Jesus as the focus of Epiphany, which are like demonstrations of the Incarnation, and God choosing to be present with us in human form? Some questions would be,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:06

What does my baptism mean? Who is it I have committed to follow in that act? And if this is all about Jesus and Jesus revealing God, what does it mean to follow a God who knows and experienced our trials? You know, here's Jesus, very human, very vulnerable. And then in his baptismal experience, what does it mean that that's what we're entering into? Jesus who knows about our struggles and our weaknesses, and had to face them too? And then, as we're thinking about Jesus baptism, how will I follow? And what a great question to be asking ourselves near the beginning of the year? How will I follow Jesus this year? What opportunities are here this year that weren't here last year to follow Jesus?

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:58

And then if we go Another set of meanings connected with Epiphany,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:02

Which we haven't mentioned before.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:03

That just the miracle of Canan, we just kind of brushed over that earlier, but the water to wine. Again, there's water involved a bunch of stone jars of water, right? That's sometimes been the focus that Epiphany in some Eastern churches. So there's other questions we could ask.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:18

Like, at the New Year as we raise our glasses, with whatever's in them, bubbling whatever, what am I open to seeing God do? So? What miracles Am I willing to be surprised by in this year? Maybe our carbonated grape juice won't turn into wine, but maybe God's at work doing some other things that we hadn't expected. And then what ordinary things in my life, am I willing to let God transform into

something fine and tasty. But that whole idea that sometimes our normal life, we get pretty numb to the possibilities, the miraculous power of God's presence in the world. And the idea that somehow this journey with Christ, this taking Christ in and putting Christ on, you know, all these different images from scripture, that this is what eternal life is that we live now. Maybe that's the miracle that our ordinary lives get to be something different, that there's a new dimension to it, these new layers of what life means. And maybe that's where we need to make room for the everyday water of our lives to be turned to the wine by Christ's presence at work in us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:38

So basically, what we're suggesting is that all of these Christian feast days and holidays and periods within the liturgical calendar, they offer us a chance to have different questions raised for us as part of our discipleship, rather than just a calendar date we check off, maybe there's something else that can happen by focusing on them. Because we come to the end here, it's just should note that for those listeners who are Community of Christ or who attend Community of Christ churches, are hymnal Community of Christ Sings actually has an Epiphany section in it. It's some hymns 438 to 448. And I'll give you a sample of some of these hymns are about the Magi, as they should be. This one by Ruth Duck. This is called "Not in Grand Estate." And I'll just read the first stanza and the refrain, it's just marvelous. "Not in grand estate, you make your earthly home, not among the great, you come to bring Shalom. Living with the poor, you shine, there's the light image, you shine with God's own light, knock upon our door, find shelter for the night. And the refrain is Jesus show the way your living Word has freed us come and shine today. Jesus show us the way and send your star to lead us." That's a great Epiphany hymn great words to help us think about the day. And so by the way, in the liturgical calendar, there's Epiphany, and then it's ordinary time after that the Sundays are marked First Sunday after Epiphany and so on till we get to Ash Wednesday and the start of Lent. So Epiphany can be treated as almost as a season if you want to. So just some final thoughts here. I have a little book Charmaine gave me years ago. It's a collection of some prayers from the great Swiss theologian Karl Bart. And I enjoyed reading them. And Carl Bart is a mentor and a hero. I like theologians who stand up to Nazis. He was one of them. But he has a couple of prayers for epiphany. And I've got excerpts from two of them here. Just listen to this. In one of them, he says, "Awaken us, give us your light. protect us from hypocrisy, error, boredom and distraction". That's a great prayer all the time. But think of that,

Carla Long 28:50

I feel like he's coming after me like me specifically. I mean, give me a break your cardboard.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:57

Carla's like "Carl, I feel judged."

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:02

Kind of a little tongue in cheek, perhaps their

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:04

excerpt from another of his Epiphany purse goes like this. It says, "You love to us first. Do not leave us in lovelessness in indecisiveness, and in the cold." So Carl Bart Who was Swiss. I mean, you think about being in the Alps in January, do not leave us in the cold. Anyway, so what we've done here is

we've just tried to give an overview and introduction to Epiphany, which if the ancient church had mostly had its way would be the big thing we celebrated this time of year. And Christmas would be what? What is that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:08

Well, this has just been really cool to learn all about the different things around Epiphany and how literally, it is just a day that goes unnoticed for most people, most Protestants, at least in the United States, and maybe it's a bigger deal in the Commonwealth. I don't know.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:55

It's one of the beauties of the lectionary is that it draws us to our attention and allows us to go a little deeper.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:01

Well, you're right about the Commonwealth at least in England, we did a little looking earlier today. And there are still such things as 12th night parties in England, it's a big thing. So they're in Dickens, England, right? Christmas is a season, not meaning to be critical here has been something maybe not as healthy about jamming the whole Christmas season into Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, where it becomes a stress fest for lots of people, the annual festival of stress. But if we were able to spread it out over the 12 days, and then end on Epiphany, it would be a different kind of thing. Of course, there would be food the whole way through. I'm just show yeah.

Carla Long 30:38

And I always have this little like conflict within me because I want to sing Advent songs leading up to Christmas, and sing Christmas hymns after Christmas. But after Christmas, I just don't have the Christmas Spirit as much anymore. So I really need to work hard to continue that to sing those Christmas hymns, all the way through to Epiphany and then sing those wonderful Epiphany hymns after that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:59

And thank God, we don't have a Super Bowl hymns section, which is usually what happens in January in the United States. After Epiphany. Everything has towards the next festival, which is the Super Bowl Sunday, I guess.

Carla Long 31:10

The season of Super Bowl. Absolutely. Yes. Well, thank you so much. You too. I really appreciated this. I learned a lot as usual, and I hope that you have a wonderful epiphany.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:22

And you too. Thanks, Carla.

Carla Long 31:24

Thank you.

Josh Mangelson 31:34

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