

WHO RULES? WHOSE RULES?

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Matthew 2:1-18

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First Presbyterian Church

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Service for the Lord's Day

Epiphany is January 6th, the 12th day of Christmas, but we have chosen this day, the second Sunday of Christmas, as we sometimes do, to celebrate epiphany, to read the traditional text from Matthew about the Visit of the Magi, and to sing “We Three Kings.” And I hope you noticed that I read a little further than we usually do when we read the story of the Visit of the Magi, or the wise men. Usually we stop at verse 12, which would end the story at “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” But we kept reading today, because that is not the last mention of the Magi in chapter two of the Gospel of Matthew. And when we stop there, we sort of sanitize or sentimentalize the story. It fits in a lot better with our Christmas pageants and nativity sets to stop at verse 12. But there’s more to this story, and it’s not so pretty.

Our story begins, of course, with wise men from the East coming to Jerusalem to ask about the location of Jesus, the one whose star they are following, the one who has been “born king of the Jews”? There has been a great deal of speculation about just who these wise men, these magi, were—were they a Persian priestly class? A group of philosophers? Zoroastrians? Astronomers? Astrologers? There are a host of opinions about who they were. You can take your choice. And though we sang it this morning, they probably weren’t kings. And I’m sure you know, there’s no way to know if there were three of them. There could have been two or two dozen. But, it doesn’t matter so much who they were or how many there were. What is clear enough is that they had made a long journey to see this child, and ultimately what matters is who they came to see.

And I suppose the wise men didn’t realize that they were stirring up trouble by going to Jerusalem for answers. Herod’s reaction, when he hears that they are in town and who they were looking for, is one of fear. Herod operates out of fear. But Herod wasn’t alone. The Gospel writer Matthew tells us “All Jerusalem with him” was frightened, too. Jerusalem was afraid because of what this could mean. A new “King of the Jews”? Their life was fairly stable the way it was under Herod. What kind of threat would a new king be to their security, to their way of life?

Now it’s easy to be critical of Herod and Jerusalem in retrospect. But these feelings should sound familiar enough to us. Because we like the security of our Herods. Of those people, those things that we think can promise us safety and security. We like the security that we think comes from might. Because we are fearful and anxious. And so we turn to any number of things—we turn to technology, and we install alarm systems, and we put even more in our retirement savings, and we move to a better school district, or put our kids in private school, and we arm ourselves beyond any sense of reason. And while we’re at it, we post happy family pictures on Facebook which are a charade because no one is really happy, and we are too embarrassed to tell anyone the real problems we are facing in our lives because it would reveal our imperfections. And we worship independence like a god—some of us live alone or keep driving or keep doing whatever long past the time it’s safe for the sake of independence, young

people rebel for the sake of independence, we all want our own way for the sake of independence—never willing to acknowledge that we all actually depend on each other. And turning to so many things to try to save us that can never be our saviors. Over and over again we turn to the wrong saviors. We turn to the Herods of the world to save us. And it is to our own peril. Because the Herods of the world are not concerned about us. They are only concerned about their own power. And as we read on in the Gospel of Matthew we will see that it isn't long before Herod turns on Jerusalem, killing all its children. So I guess Jerusalem had good reason to be afraid—they were just afraid of the wrong king.

But I digress.

As our story goes, Herod sends for these wise men, these Magi, and asks them to go ahead and search for the child, and then to bring back word when they find him, so that he too, can go and “pay him homage.” That's not true, of course. Herod has no intention of paying reverence to this usurper. What he's really doing is using the wise men to gather intelligence. But that's how things work when it comes to national security. Lies are part of the rules of the game. You do what you have to do.

It doesn't seem like the wise men have an immediate sense of Herod's deception—maybe the language barrier or cultural difference helps Herod keep them in the dark—so the wise men continue on their faithful journey, and pretty soon they get to the house—now we usually picture this as part of the manger scene, but as Matthew relates it, this is really an event which happens some time later, when the family is settled in a home and Jesus is a toddler. And the wise men offer the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And they worship.

And then, somehow they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod—Matthew doesn't make it clear whether this warning is divine in origin or just intuition—or perhaps intuition is divine, isn't it? At any rate, they don't return to Herod and head home a different way.

Which all seems well and good if we stop the story there. But as it turns out, this action infuriates Herod and causes him to begin the process of slaughtering infants. All children two years and younger. It seems like such a horrific decision to make. Even for ancient times. But maybe it looked different from Herod's perspective. He didn't start out intending to kill all those babies. Maybe he felt like his hand was forced when the Magi tricked him by going home another way. Sure, he was lying to them, but for their own good, and they were foreigners after all. Who knew what they were really up to? All he wanted to do was get the intelligence so he could go after the one family. That one baby had to die for the sake of Israel's existence as a nation. I mean, if the Romans thought Herod couldn't keep things under control, they would get rid of him and put in someone else who didn't understand Israel at all. So all Herod really needed was to get rid of that one baby. But now there was collateral damage. He thought it was all for the sake of stability, though, for the sake of the nation. Really, it was to keep the peace. It was just a rational decision.¹

Of course, this horrible act didn't do what it was designed to do, after all. Because an angel appeared to Joseph, telling him to take the child Jesus, and Mary, and to flee to Egypt. To become refugees. And so Joseph, who perhaps by now is used to getting strange messages from angels, did exactly that. And of course, this is all just the beginning of the story. There is much more work for Jesus to do. But from the very beginning of the story we're presented with the

¹ These are my own words, but this idea came from the Rev. Andrew D. Ruth's sermon “A Very Bloody Christmas” at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, NY on December 29, 2013.

choice of two kings. The kings of this world, or the King of kings. The Herods of the world or Jesus.

Christmas helps us settle the question of who rules, and this story of the visit of the Magi is just one more step in settling that question. A God who comes to live among us. A God who we celebrate with earth and heaven as king, as we have done right here in this sanctuary throughout Advent and Christmas. But sometimes I have to wonder whether you and I are really willing to follow the King we acknowledge. We have an easy enough time saying Jesus is Lord, but the allure of the false security offered by the Herods of this world is strong. We worship a God whose power is demonstrated in vulnerability, but too often we follow the gods of earthly power and wealth and might.

The question this text ultimately poses for us is who do we think this world belongs to? Do we think it belongs to Herod? Or do we think it belongs to Jesus? And then one more step—who do we choose to follow?

Following Christ doesn't mean we won't have fearful times. We live in this world, not any other world, and this world is still full of things that might cause us anxiety, grief, and pain, even great pain. The question is, when faced with those things, do we remember who really rules? And whose rules will we follow? Do we operate out of fear, like Herod did? Or do we trust Jesus, who shows us what it means to be truly human, who shows us what God's power looks like—power in vulnerability, a power that doesn't have to be defended at the expense of innocent children. Do we trust Jesus, who gives us a new way to live.

Jesus offers an alternative. Promises instead of lies. Light that the darkness can't overcome. Power found not in might, but in vulnerability. Most of all, Jesus offers us himself, Emmanuel, God with us.

Today's story is a horrible story. And perhaps it doesn't feel that Christmas-y. It doesn't feel like the season of twinkling lights and gift-exchanging and Christmas music on the radio that we have just been through. It's a story that begins with gifts, but it ends with unspeakable tragedy. It is a horrible story. But in a way it has its own beauty. Because it demonstrates to us the true message of the incarnation. That God is with us in THIS world. That God came, not to obliterate the world because it was so awful, but to be with us, even when things are at their very worst. That God came, because God was so determined that we understand the Good News of God's transforming love for us and for the whole world, that God brought that news to us himself.

And so...

If this Christmas has seemed especially dark to you because of grief or sadness or separation, I want you to know that there is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome.

If this world seems terrifying to you and you are searching for some sense of security, I want you to know that there are promises you can trust, the promises of God in Jesus Christ, that are different, that are a sure alternative to the lies of the Herods of this world.

And if you feel lost and vulnerable, I want you to know that there is power available to you that is different than the power of violence, and wealth, and coercion, but is the power of vulnerability—the power of a God who would deign to become human, who would flee as a refugee, and who would ultimately go to the cross.

Thanks be to God. Amen.