

Matthew 2:1-11

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem,

2:2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east, and have come to pay him homage."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

2:9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon: No Room for Another King

The gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy – a living history of Israel’s covenant with God. God asked Israel to be in covenant, to follow God’s laws, and in return, God would offer abundance and protection. Israel complied...for a while at least. And then a pattern developed for 42 generations: that’s Abraham to Jesus. The people of Israel broke God’s covenant time and again. And each time, God would offer grace and send an agent to restore the covenant. Israel would repent, and act right, but only for a while. And then the pattern would repeat itself. Humanity kept making its revisions to the world God intended.

Crimes, wars, bigotry, discrimination, polluted streams and rivers, and on and on; just plain-ole brokenness.

As Matthew’s genealogy ends and the meat of our story begins, The author tells us that Mary and Joseph will bear a son named Jesus, who will save the world from this perpetual brokenness. Jesus will remind the world of what it was intended to be. And better still, Jesus will offer us the hope that God’s intended world can exist right here and right now.

Today's text foreshadows the struggle woven throughout the whole of Matthew's gospel: The people in power – those who have revised God's intended order – will fight, and claw and scratch against any force that seeks to undo their revisions. There is no room for another king in Jerusalem.

But room or not, a new king has been born. And our story this morning tells us that three different groups have heard news of this child who is to be the King of the Jews.

Three kinds of people. Three kinds of stories. Three kinds of feelings. But all of them know one thing: There is no room for another king. Hear now their stories.

Herod:

Herod was tired. Running a kingdom is exhausting – It's like herding cats or playing whack-a-mole. Just as soon as you are about to resolve one crisis, another two or three pop up. And then another, and still another. There are always complications: peasants who don't like your tax policies, Roman senators to appease, unruly enemies who have to be discarded. It can be a nasty business.

Herod had been herding cats for well over thirty years, and he was finally starting to enjoy the fruit of his labors. As King of the Jews, Herod had quashed a civil war, rebuilt the temple, added much needed seaports, and sustained peace in the region. But it wasn't easy.

Herod's personal life was full of drama! He had at least ten wives, and ten sons, and there was constant plotting and scheming to win Herod's favor. His was a house in turmoil, and on more than one occasion, Herod had disposed of a troublesome wife or an ambitious son. Herod

wasn't a nice guy, but give him credit, he was a hard worker. And now, he was ready to relax in one of his lavish palaces and enjoy retirement.

And then this?!? This!!! He didn't know whether to be angry or frightened. Right now, Herod was both. Rumors were swirling about a newborn king in Bethlehem. Folks were calling this baby the King of the Jews. King of the Jews? No sir. Not on Herod's watch. There was no room for another king.

The Priests and the Scribes:

The temple priests and scribes seemed content. Jerusalem wasn't a perfect place. But this was paradise compared to what their ancestors endured. At the beginning of the first century, temple priests and scribes had gainful employment and plenty of food on their table.

They didn't love Herod. They probably didn't even like him. But they did tolerate him. Herod wasn't the most observant or faithful Jew. He observed Roman Holidays and lived a life of opulence. But Herod had renovated the Jewish Temple, tripling its size, and employing over 1,000 temple priests and scribes as masons and carpenters in the process. The priesthood lived in comfort and had a sustainable economy to support itself. Things could have been a whole lot worse.

So why rock the boat now? Sure, they knew what the scriptures had foretold. A child would be born in Bethlehem who would be the Shepherd of Israel, who would help bring about a great nation once more. But this prophecy was over 600 years old, and there had been plenty of these stories in the past. The priests and scribes were in no hurry to find this Messiah, especially if doing so might disrupt the status quo. "We'll wait for more details," they said. And besides, there was no room for another king.

The Wise Men

A group of wise men were giddy with excitement. They'd never felt this feeling before. These wise men or magi lived to the East of Jerusalem. They were gentiles who did not worship the God that Herod claimed to know. And they were not well-versed in scripture like priests and scribes of the temple. They interpreted dreams and followed the patterns of stars. And when a new star from the West caught their gaze, they knew they had to follow it.

And something, perhaps the presence of God, awakened them to the realization that this star would lead them to a child who would be King of the Jews. So off they went. It would make sense that that the new king would be in the capital city. But when they got to Jerusalem, they found another king named Herod. Herod was curious about when they had first seen this star, and he told them that he, too, would like to pay homage to the child they sought. "Go and find him, and send word to me when you do." He seemed sincere.

The men followed the star to Bethlehem, where it stopped above the house they were seeking. And they were filled with a sense of overwhelming joy. And inside they found the child and his mother. And they recognized this new king. They offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then a dream warned them not to go back to Herod. Perhaps this dream was the presence of God dwelling among them again. Instead, they travelled home via another route. A new king had come into the world, but these men were wise. They knew that there was no room for another king.

Three kinds of people. Three kinds of stories. Three kinds of feelings. And in each story, the characters know that there cannot be another king. Another king will change everything!!!

First there is Herod. Like so many earthy kings before him, he's shaped his kingdom, not with God's reform and intention, but with his own revisions. He's built a machine that feeds his thirst for power and wealth. The machine is too big to fail, and every threat, even a child in Bethlehem, must be eliminated. The empire will strike back at Jesus' birth, just as it will strike back at his ministry.

Then there are the priests and scribes. The safety of the establishment has diluted their faith. Their comfort now dictates their conscience. They refuse to look for this child because they know that this child will only bring discomfort and uncertainty to their lifestyle. Jesus will humanize their Torah and criticize their abuses of temple privilege. He'll force them to face their own hypocrisy. And they won't like it. The empire strikes back at Jesus' birth, just as it will strike back at his ministry.

Finally, there are the wise men. Like so many gentiles before them, folks like Ruth and Rahab and Tamar, God works through these wise persons to reveal God's intentions. Matthew's gospel reminds us that God can work through anyone, and that Christ's community will be open to all who seek it. And these magi are wise. For they know that kings like Herod perceive kings like Jesus as a threat. Therefore, they flee to safety via another route home. The empire strikes back at Jesus' birth by making the faithful cautious.

If we're honest, we realize that Matthew's gospel is a living history. It's a story of a fight between two groups – those editors who have revised God's world to meet their own selfish needs, and those reformers who seek to restore God's world to its intended purpose; to make it one sustained by covenant people.

If we're honest with ourselves, we will also recognize that we are similar to both Herod's agents AND the Wise Men.

Like Herod's agents, we are revisionists. This morning, we pray, like every week, "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done."

Baptist Preacher and beloved dissenter Will Campbell once asked, "But what if that actually happened? What if God's kingdom came, and what if God's will was really done?"

Campbell notes that just like Herod's establishment, we fear for what would happen. Without war or crime or polluted streams, our economy would collapse. With no polluting factories and no massive industries, where would we get the luxurious goods we crave? And what would happen if our church house had a higher population of addicts, ex-cons, and prostitutes than it did school teachers, physicians, and attorneys? What if just like the Acts church, we really did share our possessions so efficiently that everyone's needs were met?

What would the Herods in our community say when we told them we were just trying to help usher in God's kingdom? Would they accept it, and let us live comfortably and without fear of persecution? Or would we forfeit our social, financial, and political status in Herod's modern-day establishments? Like the priest and scribes, we cling to the comfort we find in earthly kingdoms.

Like the Wise Men, and like Luke's Shepherds, we are seeking to be reformers. We've spent the last six weeks preparing our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child, this being who will bring peace and goodwill to all humanity, who will open the banquet table to everyone, and who will shepherd us back to covenant living.

But do we really want to receive the epiphany with a full heart? It seems we'd like to have the best of both worlds: we want Christ to come and join us in a world where we remain comfortable, content, and sheltered from Herod's threats. This new kingdom is hard, almost impossible it seems. And so just like the Wise Men, we avoid going back through Jerusalem. We avoid a confrontation with Herod.

But if we've read attentively, we remember that Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus will do what we cannot. Jesus will not avoid Jerusalem and its empire that strikes out against him. Jesus will walk right into its teeth, accepting its wrath in the form of a cross. And that will change everything.

Christ's example will give us the courage to admit our own hypocrisy, and to pray with genuine resolve that God's Kin-dom will come and God's will be done. And when we open ourselves to God's will rather than our own, we begin to cultivate kin-dom moments. We will not bring about some wished-for Utopia. Instead, we will bring about moments that encompass our true potential – to be caretakers for one another, loving God and loving neighbor. We will follow the long, hard road back to covenant-living, empowered by the Easter hope, and sustained by God's grace.

The Empire will always strike back, but our faith reminds us that one day, it will strike back with love. During Epiphany, we discover that there are two kings in Jerusalem. It's easy to figure out that there can only be one king. The hard part is deciding which one we will choose to follow.

Amen.