

Clash of Kingdoms * Matthew 2

January 5, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Getting ready for Christmas this year, I had a really neat realization – this was my fifth Christmas here at Langford church. Five years! So far, so good 😊 It was really neat to look back over my files from the past and think about what we've done in years gone by and all the ways we've celebrated Christmas.

And it struck me – I've been here five years and I have barely said anything about wise men. I mean, I've mentioned them here and there, but I've never really dug too deep into their story.

And to be honest, I think that there is at least a subconscious reason for that – the magi don't really belong on Christmas Eve. We often think of them with the shepherds on the left, the wise men on the right, but the reality is that the wise men didn't arrive until at least six months later and probably even more than that.

But arrive they did and so we need to think about why they're there – both in Bethlehem – and in the opening pages of Matthew's Gospel. Why did they come to see Jesus, but maybe even more importantly, why has Matthew specifically chosen to include them in his retelling of Jesus' life? Mark and Luke and John, they would have known about the magi, but Matthew alone has chosen to include them in his recollection of Jesus birth. Why?

The answer, I think, is this:

Matthew has included the story of the wise men in order to ask us – whose kingdom are we serving? God's Kingdom or our own? The kingdom of the world, or the Kingdom of God?

The reason that I say that is that Matthew 2 is actually a clash of kingdoms – the kingdom of the newborn king vs the kingdom of Herod. There is a real struggle going on here, and the Magi appear on the scene in order to make us ask – 'whose side are we on?' The wise men chose to side with the Christ; who are we going to honour?

Turn with me to Matthew 2 and we'll get into it. Matthew 2, starting in verse 1.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

Now – familiar passage – with some unfamiliar things. What's a magi? What's up with the star? Who's Herod?

Let's start with the magi. The basic assumption in the ancient near east was that the heavens mirrored the earth. Every person that was born had a star in the sky and the bigger the star, the more important you'd be, and so the logic was that you could predict the movement of the world by the movement of the stars. And so a class of priestly philosophers developed who would spend their time studying the stars. Kings kept them in their courts so that they could anticipate from the heavens what would happen on earth. These are the magi – the so-called 'wise men' – who gained knowledge from the stars.

So when these guys, probably over in Persia, saw a brilliant star in the western sky, they anticipated that someone very important was to be born. Tradition held that a constellation appeared when Alexander the Great was born and a similar star appeared for Abraham and for Mithradates (who was a kind of Persian Julius Caesar).

And given that this luminous star appeared in the sky over Judea, they got REAL excited. Because there was a well-known prophecy in the East at that time that the ruler of the world would come from Judea.¹

So whether they went on their own, or as emissaries from their king, these magi grabbed some gifts, packed up and headed west. Now to be honest, we really have no idea how many there were – the assumption is that there were three wise men because they brought three gifts. And although they're sometimes called 'Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar,' there's no real way to know their names because those names there don't appear in the written record until 500 years later. For sure though, magi from distant lands saw the star and came looking for Jesus.

Now, knowing where the star was and assuming that the newborn king of the Jews would be born in the capital of the Jews, they went to Jerusalem and started asking around – 'we're looking for the newborn king.'

Well, verse 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him (Mat 2:1-3 NIV).

If you think back to Christmas Eve and Dan's spot on portrayal of Herod the great, you'll understand why all of Jerusalem was disturbed with him.

Herod was – from a worldly point of view – great. He expanded the borders of Jerusalem, made the temple a magnificent site and made some major improvements to the Judean infrastructure.

But he was also a paranoid and pompous son of a gun. He was not actually Jewish – he was Idumean (essentially an Edomite, from south of Judah) and so he was a foreigner sitting on David's throne. He got where he was by cosying up to Rome – in fact, he was friends with Mark Antony – and he was ruthless in his pursuit of power. He loved his wife Mariamne desperately but she never really loved him like he loved her and so eventually he had her executed. He had two of his sons executed, prompting Caesar Augustus back in Rome to say better to be Herod's pig than his son. And when he was close to death, he had hundreds of Jewish community leaders rounded up and detained in an arena so that when he died, his army would kill all of them, and then at least someone would cry when he was dead. (They didn't end up doing it). Herod was a real dirt bag.

Which is why everyone got really nervous when a star, foretelling the birth of the rightful king of Israel appeared in the sky. Because – what's Herod going to do, now that there's a challenge to his throne?

Well, like Dan said on Christmas Eve, Herod not was all slice and dice – he knew how to work the system diplomatically, and so he brought these wise men into his court, found out from HIS wise men where the king would be born and then sent them away to go track him down.

Now of course you know the story – verse 11 - On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

The foreigners, Gentiles really, humble themselves to honour Jesus as the newborn king – that’s a big deal in the flow of salvation history.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route (Mat 2:11-12 NIV).

That’s the story of the magi – wise men following the star to find and worship the light of the world.

That’s what it says – now what does it mean? What does Matthew want us to see in this account?

Well, like I said before, this is a clash of kingdoms. It’s not immediately obvious – it’s not like Matthew’s plastered a boxing promotion right in the middle of his gospels – but that’s what it is. This is a content of two kingdoms – the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God and the wise men are right there in the middle asking us “which one has our allegiance?”

See, on one hand, you have the kingdom of God, represented by the newborn king Jesus, laying in the manger. Now at this point, he is just a baby, and he might not look that impressive, but Matthew has told us something important about who He’s going to be. And it’s actually tied up in the prophecy about Bethlehem that I skipped over earlier.

Remember – Herod doesn’t know where the baby will be and the chief priests go combing through the Law and they come up with that passage from Micah. It says that the baby will be born in Bethlehem. Now that’s important because it tells us where the baby will be born, but even more importantly, it tells us what the baby will be like.

See Matthew is pulling from something that God said in Micah’s time. And it’s kind of neat that we spent last week thinking about Micah and his culture – remember last week – it was a culture where profit was more important than justice, pleasure more important than truth and our purposes more important than God’s? Well that wasn’t all – people were being taken advantage of by their neighbours and the leaders – the very people who should have stepped in to do something – were themselves exploiting the people. This was not a good culture to live in.

Well, right in the middle of it, God spoke through his prophet Micah, and this is what He said: Micah 5:2

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2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. "
4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.
5 And he will be their peace."

In the midst of this turmoil and injustice, God promises a king who will come and make things right. Yes, He will be born in Bethlehem but even more importantly, His Kingdom will be characterized by strength and security and peace. He will not be a conqueror who exploits his people but a shepherd who will lead and feed and heal His people – and Matthew says – that’s Jesus. By highlighting this Micah passage, Matthew is telling us - This baby that the wise men are choosing is the shepherd king that God promised. He will rule over a kingdom where people enjoy strength and security and peace.

That’s the kingdom of God – a kingdom of blessing.

In the other corner is the kingdom of the world – and Herod sits on that throne. If God's kingdom is characterized by strength and security and peace, then Herod's kingdom is made up of violence and selfishness and paranoia.

You know the rest of the story – when he finds out that the Magi have outwitted him, he straight up slaughters innocent babies, in the hopes that he will wipe out the one who challenges his authority. Herod is willing to perpetrate terrible violence just to protect his own interests.

And that he does out of utter selfishness – he doesn't care about the babies; he just wants to protect his throne. He won't step aside and let the rightful king rule. He's out for his own good, protecting his own interests at any cost and he will not stop until he is the centre of his world.

And even then, he's obsessed with keeping that power, driven to paranoia, protecting his interests from even imagined threats. It's no wonder Jerusalem got disturbed when Herod got disturbed. They knew him. They knew his paranoia and his violence and his selfishness and they feared for their own well-being.

And sadly, Herod is not dead. He lives in our world. He lives in our leaders. He lives in each and every one of us. He not always as blatant as the original Herod, but he's there. That's what Dale Bruner says; he writes – “Herod lives on in us... in our exaggerated ambitions, pretensions, self-centredness, greed for position, grudge against God, guile and finally human cruelty and insensitivity...” (Bruner, 71).

The kingdom of Herod is alive and well in our world.

And here's the wise men hanging out in the Gospel of Matthew saying – which kingdom will you choose? The kingdom of God? Or the kingdom of self? The kingdom of strength and security and peace? Or the kingdom of violence and selfishness and paranoia?

It's interesting to see how the characters in Matthew respond. These foreigners – Gentiles, really – travel hundreds of kilometres, at least six months, probably more to honour the newborn king – but the Jewish leaders won't travel the five clicks down the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see the Lord.

Which one of those are you? Whose kingdom are you living for? God's kingdom? Or your own?

Take the magi; put 'em together with Matthew 6:33 and you get the big idea for today – Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all that you truly need will be added unto you. Put Jesus' kingdom first. Let Him be the king of your life.

How do you do that? Well, I think that it starts by getting off the throne of your life and inviting Jesus to take His rightful place as king. Make like the magi and kneel before Him to say 'Jesus, You are worthy of all my praise' – not just my gold and incense and myrrh but my life.' And then get up and walk with Him. Make His priorities your priorities. Resist the urge to be like Herod and do things your way; instead, follow the shepherd who leads us to blessing in both green pastures and dark valleys.

The kingdom of self is finite but the kingdom of God is eternal.

The kingdom of man is violent and selfish and paranoid; the kingdom of God is strength and security and peace.

Follow the magi to honour the king and put Jesus' kingdom first.

Benediction (2 Peter 3:18)

(May you) grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

ⁱ (For example, Suetonius who lived at the same time as Jesus wrote - There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world. Suetonius, *Vespasian*, 4)