

“Clashing Kingdoms”

Introduction: Over the course of the last month or so we’ve been talking in one way or another about the good news, about the arrival of the king, Jesus, and with his arrival, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, the way of heaven making its way into our earthly existence. The angels announced this good news with great song and loud fanfare. The shepherds spread this good news to anyone who would listen. Mary pondered this good news deeply in her heart. And the rest of the gospels, and NT, will unfold the significance of this good news for our lives.

But as we hear from Matthew today, not everyone considered the arrival of Jesus to be good news. King Herod, along with many of the religious folk in Jerusalem, found the birth of this new king to be disturbing news. In fact, the worship by the Magi and the scheming of Herod set up a contrast and clash that continues and deepens as the story of Jesus unfolds and makes its way to the cross. It is a clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. It happens because Jesus, Matthew wants us to know from the start, is no mere tourist attraction. He is a rival king who calls for our allegiance, and has brought with him a new and very different kind of power than that wielded by the world. Through sacrificial love, leading him all the way to his embrace of death on a cross, Jesus would challenge and overthrow the world’s way of peace and power and glory. This way of Jesus, this way of the kingdom of God, is a way we need to understand, receive, and live out.

I. The Search of the Magi

A. Let’s begin to think about this with the search of the Magi, or “3 Kings” as our Christmas pageants affectionately dub them. “3” became the number only because of the three gifts that were brought. But it’s likely, given the way these guys liked to travel, that there was at least a handful who made their way to Jerusalem, and eventually to Bethlehem. For certain they weren’t really kings. Instead the term Magi is used to designate a priestly class of skilled astronomers, astrologers, fortune-tellers, and even magicians. They, like many who lived before the days of street lights, diligently studied the stars. They believed that if something important was happening on earth you could see it reflected in the heavens. Alternatively, if something unusual and remarkable was seen in the heavens, than something unusual and remarkable was likely to be taking place on earth.

B. What the Magi actually saw is open to speculation. Several astrological happenings are suggested for what this remarkable “star” of Matthew was, though no one can be sure. The best guess along these lines is a time when the planet Jupiter, which had come to designate royalty, became aligned with Saturn, which had come to represent the Jews. The conclusion could have been drawn that there was a new king in town. Or, since the word “star” can also designate an angel, such a figure could have been what the Magi saw, an angel that not only heralded the birth of Jesus, as had been done for the shepherds, but who led them to Bethlehem and then warned them in a dream, which seems to be the way of angels (see Joseph), to go home by another route.

C. It’s also worth noting that the Magi had some familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures, used by colonies of worshipping Jews which had remained in the east and not returned home when the period of Jewish Exile had been completed. Interestingly, in the book of Numbers, a star formed part of Jewish messianic expectation: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not

near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel” (Nu. 24:12). All that is to say, it was the confluence of several factors, ranging from pagan astrology to the Jewish Scriptures, that set the Magi on their nearly 900-mile quest, a journey that would have taken them several months by camel by the time they arrived in the holy city of Jerusalem.

II. The Magi at Worship

A. It is remarkable, really, the journey that these pagan astrologers took, and their response of worship once they finally arrived in Bethlehem, presenting Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, elements they would have used in their astrological practices. Their worship recalls OT passages, like Isaiah 60 from our Call to Worship, where leaders of Gentile nations presented gifts of gold and incense to the king of Israel and the nations would be drawn to his light. It’s what the day and season of Epiphany are all about, which began on January 6 and runs until Lent. It’s a season that celebrates the showing forth or revelation of Jesus to the Gentiles as King of kings and Lord of lords.

B. How much did the Magi really know about the Christ child? Did they intend the gold, the precious metal of kings, to celebrate his deity, the frankincense used by priests to identify his priestly call to reconcile God and man, and the myrrh used in burials to indicated the death by which this would all take place? Likely not. Their worship was probably far more than they understood. But they certainly seemed to recognize that they were in the presence of the holy, in the presence of something far different than they were accustomed to and that began to satisfy their search. It stirred their emotions – they were moved with joy. It moved their bodies – they bowed down before him. It overflowed in generosity of spirit – they offered gifts from their treasures. And it opened them to God’s guidance – God’s direction coming to them in a dream to leave in a different way than they had come.

C. If advent is the season of waiting, then the experience of the Magi and the season of Epiphany, becomes a season of journeying. It reveals the wonderful combination of God’s loving, leading grace, and the Magi’s wholehearted, honest, desire to explore the authenticity of the Christ child for themselves. In many ways, the Magi are models of not sitting around, but striking out with what they know, leaving the familiar, traveling from the known to the unknown, seeking the spiritual growth and transformation that comes from humility, letting go, and moving bravely in a new direction. Their worship also serves as a declaration that this new direction is all about Jesus, the Spirit conceived child, the Immanuel—God with us—who has come to save us from our sins, as Matthew identifies him in his opening chapter. In this Christ child, we truly have found the King of kings and Lord of lords, the light of, and for, all nations.

III. The Scheming of Herod

A. By way of contrast, Herod wanted none of this. Appointed by the Roman Empire to be the local ruler over Judea, Herod understood himself to be the king of the Jews. So when the Magi landed on his doorstep in Jerusalem wanting to make sure their heavenly GPS system was functioning properly so they could find the real king of the Jews, Herod was deeply disturbed at this news. He wanted to be, and remain, the king. He had no real interest in any kind of journey. Up to this point, being the insecure, paranoid man that he was, Herod had taken extreme steps to remove any threats to his power, including the murder of his wife, mother-in-law, and three of his sons. So when foreigners came to worship one they called the king of the Jews, and Herod was frustrated in his attempts to be able to track him down and eliminate him, Herod had all the boys under the age of two, who lived in the vicinity of Bethlehem, massacred.

B. The Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem were equally as disturbed. It turns out that they knew the Scriptures but didn't want to investigate or allow them to have any authority over their lives. They, as can happen in any age, had aligned themselves politically with the local ruler, no matter what he believed. It was all about having and keeping power. If his power base was threatened, so would theirs be. These leaders, as well as Herod, were blind to the redemptive purposes of God because their own ambition and desire got in the way. They wanted no one to be king, or have authority, over them, but to continue to live in the world's way of power and glory. They had no desire to deny themselves and take up a cross and follow the King of kings, but to keep their egocentric selves on the thrones of their lives.

Importantly, the title, "king of the Jews," would appear again in Matthew's gospel, but not until the end of the life of Jesus. There, as the trajectory of Matthew gospel traces out the clashing of kings and kingdoms until it hits the cross, we hear it on the mocking lips of the soldiers who were in charge of crucifying Jesus:

They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. . . Then they knelt in front of him and mocked him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. After they had mocked him, they took off the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. [Ma 27:28-29]

Among other things, this mocking claim, and the choice not to fight back or have his followers take up swords and do battle with the Romans (cf. John 18:36) serves as a declaration that the way of King Jesus does not operate according to normal human expectations. It does not seek to bring about peace through violence, and the instruments of sword or spear, bomb or bullet, but through sacrificial love, and the power of death and resurrection. The arrival of King Jesus is actually political dynamite because this King who gives himself in servant love rules with a vastly different definition of what peace and power and glory are all about.

As we journey to the cross this morning, may we bring this King our grateful worship as we celebrate his sacrificial love for us and the victory he won there over sin, evil, and death. And may we then seek to live this love out as we take up our cross and follow him, even into the week ahead.