

Date: January 2, 2005

SUNDAY: Epiphany

SERMON: A Tale of Two Kings

Text(s): Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-18

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If you've looked at the sermon title, *A Tale of Two Kings*, you may be wondering whether I've decided to do a "Reader's Digest Condensed Version" of the story from Matthew's gospel that I just read. There were three weren't there? Don't we sing "We *Three* Kings of Orient Are?"

Well, that beloved and familiar hymn notwithstanding, the notion that the magi were royal figures is just pious legend, probably the result of early Christian interpreters conflating our Old Testament lesson, where the prophet says, "*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising,*" with this story from St. Matthew. There is nothing in the story as St. Matthew tells it in his gospel that suggests that there were only three wise men, as we frequently call them, or that they were of royal blood. The three gifts mentioned, probably gave rise to the notion that there were three magi. And centuries of pious storytelling has added names and places of origin, and even racial identities to the three kings, culminating in the "discovery" of their remains, which are now housed in the magnificent cathedral in Cologne, Germany, which was built for that purpose. And next Sunday, after the service, Sue Fitzgerald and our Sunday School children will continue the practice of perpetuating this now sacred legend at our Epiphany party, where we, along with the entire population of France, will eat "king cakes" in honor of these three royal pretenders.

In Matthew's hands, this story of pagan magi (or astrologer-priests) coming from far away to do homage to the newborn messiah is about the revelation of the messiah to the Gentiles. This is why we read it on the Feast of the Epiphany, which means a revelatory appearance or disclosure. Some such story was needed to make sense of the fact that the people

most eager to hear and believe the message of the earliest Christians that Jesus had been raised from the dead, were not, for the most part, other religious Jews, but Gentile pagans. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the early church was already attracting large numbers of Gentiles, and this increased the tensions within the ranks of Jewish religion itself and ultimately led to the expulsion of the Christians from their synagogues.

But it's not primarily the magi we're going to be thinking about this morning, but rather the *two* kings who are mentioned explicitly in Matthew's story. One is King Herod the Great, the king who ruled the territory of Judea under the sponsorship of the Roman emperor. The other is the infant born in a stable in Bethlehem, whom the magi had traveled far to see, and who asked Herod, "*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*" A comparison of these two kings, King Herod, and King Jesus, will, I hope, become an epiphany for us, a revelation of what the gospel is all about.

Herod was born into an aristocratic Gentile family that had converted to Judaism about a half century before he became king. Like his father before him, Herod felt strongly that only the administrative genius of Roman government backed by the strong military presence of the Roman legions could guarantee the stability of the region so that economic prosperity could develop. (I sometimes wonder if political thinking regarding the Middle East has changed at all in the past two millennia.) He reigned for thirty-three years with Rome's blessing and approval..

While the region did prosper under his rule, Herod became a lightning rod for the geopolitics of that region. Hated by some of his subjects as a usurper and a traitor because of his alliance with the Romans, he was also engaged in more or less constant rivalry with Cleopatra of Egypt and her Roman lover Marc Antony.

Yet he was successful in fending off all challenges to his rule. His success was due to his

readiness to quickly and ruthlessly suppress the slightest sign of resistance to his absolute authority. Over the years, he developed a finely-tuned paranoia and did not hesitate to assassinate any potential threat, including his mother-in-law, his wife, and two of his sons.

He was shrewd enough, however, to balance his harsh rule with impressive public works projects and development of the infrastructure of the country, which helped alleviate the effects of periodic droughts or famines caused by agricultural failures. He built two magnificent cities, Sebaste and Caesarea, which were marvels of their day. He strengthened his hand among some of his Jewish co-religionists by rebuilding and adding to the structures on Temple Mount in Jerusalem, including a new temple, that surpassed everything of its day for sheer magnificence, the western wall of which is still playing a central part in the passionate politics between Israelis and Palestinians today.

Herod was a sick, old man by the time Jesus was born. His paranoia about plots against him grew ever more intense, so Matthew does not stretch our credulity when he tells us this story where Herod's paranoia plays a crucial role.

After hearing from his court scribes that there was an oracle in the scroll of the prophet Micah that some interpreted as revealing that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, Herod was frightened. Was it just a coincidence that these astrologers had turned up saying that the stars had led them here because a great king had been born, a "king of the Jews?" Like almost all kings, whether ancient or modern, whether they are named kings or presidents or prime ministers, or even bishops or popes or imams or CEO's, holding onto power becomes an end in itself which justifies whatever means must be used to achieve it.

Herod is altogether too familiar a figure to us, isn't he? The world is full of Herods, and has

been for a very long time. This is kingship as we know it and have seen it practiced repeatedly throughout human history. The lure of power is stronger than just about anything else; power has been termed "the ultimate aphrodisiac." Whether exercised in the halls of government, in the temples of religion, or in corporate boardrooms, power seduces those who desire it, and ultimately corrupts them. And when power is combined with money and sex, as it is so much of the time, they become the unholy trinity, the chief rival to God's sovereignty in the world and the chief causes of most of the world's misery.

Herod's worship of this unholy trinity led him to great achievements, but also to enormous cruelties and monumental follies. In an intentional echo of the story in the Book of Exodus, where the Egyptian Pharaoh orders all male Jewish children under two to be slain, here in Matthew's story, a new Pharaoh, Herod, sends his troops to slaughter all male children under two years of age in the region around Bethlehem. The "Massacre of the Holy Innocents" as it has come to be known, has been the subject of countless paintings and has inspired musical dramas down through the centuries. One of the loveliest, and saddest, of our Christmas carols, the "Coventry Carol," is framed as a lullaby to the baby Jesus, who sleeps while the massacre is raging around him.

The massacre of the innocents has never stopped, has it? From the ovens of Auschwitz to the village of My Lai to the killing fields of Cambodia to the cemeteries and hospital wards of Chechnya to the genocide in Rwanda and Sudan, those who pursue power continue to wreak havoc on the weak, the powerless, the poor. Kings are what they are, and what they are principally, are agents of the powers of death. We are all too well-acquainted with Herod and his bloody ways.

What irony there is, then, in the magi's designation of Jesus as "king of the Jews!" What kind of king is it, whose parents must flee in the middle of the night into the Egyptian desert to

escape Herod's lethal homage? What kind of king is it who will himself end up on a Roman cross, hanging helplessly in torture, mocked by a sign over his head, "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews?" What kind of king indeed?

Not one, certainly, who is remembered for his grandiose building projects, though a few centuries later, when the lure of temporal power had seduced enough of his followers, they built many grandiose monuments, supposedly in his, but really in their own, honor. For a man who said, "*Foxes have holes and birds have their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,*" his followers have certainly built him some fine palaces. I'm not suggesting we tear down our church buildings; but perhaps we could let the memory of Jesus remind us that it is not in a building that Christ is present, but "*wherever two or three are gathered*" in his name. Buildings are not sacred places; gatherings of people in community are.

The main difference between King Herod and King Jesus is in the different way they used power. Herod used power the way we've come to expect power to be used— to *overpower* others and bend them to his own will. Whether that power is conferred through the ballot box or whether it "grows out of the barrel of a gun," as Mao Tse Tung once stated the obvious so graphically, or whether it's wielded by corporate CEO's in service to the Almighty Bottom Line or, perhaps more than is commonly admitted, simply to the Almighty Personal Ego and Bank Account, power that overpowers others is the visible epiphany of the power of death.

The power that Jesus wielded, however, is not the sort that overpowers, but rather the sort that *empowers* others and sets them free from bondage to the powers of death. It is power that grows out of servanthood. It is power characterized by giving rather than taking. It is power that lifts up the fallen, comforts the afflicted, weeps with the grieving, heals the sick, strengthens the weak, relieves the poor, and

proclaims liberty to those bound by destructive systems or even by their own impulses and compulsions. It is, in short, the power of love.

At first glance, the power of love looks a lot like weakness to eyes untrained by faith. Love often ends up hanging on a cross, and appears to be the victim of Herod's power. Love doesn't necessarily build large bank accounts or stock portfolios. Compassion can look foolish at times— a rather quixotic jousting at windmills by "bleeding heart" liberals and idealists. Love is nice, but doesn't appear to be very effective or efficient.

But you have to be on the inside, as it were, to discover how deceptive appearances are. Those who wield Herod's kind of power discover for themselves, ultimately, how corrupting and destructive of both individuals and institutions it is. They discover themselves eaten away inside until there's little of real humanity left. But those who choose the way of Christ, the way of love and servanthood, discover, on the contrary, that they become more fully human— that life itself becomes precious and pregnant with meaning. They discover that in compassionate and caring relationships with others, they have the ability to transform and enrich, not only their own lives, but whole societies. And the only way to make that discovery is to commit oneself to the rule of this other king, this king born in a stable, whose throne is a cross, this king who gives up power in order to give it to those who are powerless. "*To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God,*" says St. John, and thereby tells the simple truth. The choice between King Herod or King Jesus is a choice that confronts us every day. It is a choice that we cannot avoid. Only when we commit to live under the sovereignty of this king, will we experience our own epiphany; in our own experience, and in our own relationships, we will begin to taste the fruits of his reign, the fruits of love, justice, and peace.