

The Two Kings

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12 is one of the best-known stories in the Bible. We read it every year, usually multiple times. We tell it to our children. We put it on our Christmas cards. And when we refer to this story in conversation, we usually call it the story of the three wise men or the story of the three Magi, or sometimes, following the familiar song, we call it the story of the three kings. I understand why we do that, but I'm here to say that if we make this story all about them, we're missing something. This isn't the story of the three kings, it's the story of the two kings. The main characters are not the three guys on the camels, their satchels packed with gold, frankincense and myrrh; the main characters in this story are the two kings, one of them stewing on a throne in Jerusalem, the other toddling around his father's carpentry shop in Bethlehem. Jesus and Herod are the main guys in this chapter. You see it in the first two verses. Matthew holds these two kings in opposition to each other. "In the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came and asked, "Where is the one born King of the Jews?" If that doesn't make you go 'Uh-Oh,' you're not listening. Two kings both claiming kingship in the same place. That never ends well. And just to make sure you didn't miss it Matthew sets them up again in verses 3 and 4: King Herod is very disturbed and asks the scholars where the Messiah, literally, the anointed one, is to be born. Matthew wants you to see these two kings and he wants you to understand that they both represent two very different ways of being in this world, two very different ways of looking at the world, two very different ways of exercising power in this world. Our passage doesn't lay out the differences between these two kings completely, but follow the story to its end and you can't miss the contrast.

King Herod represents a kingdom of danger, fear and aggression. All three of those words are important. They build on each other. Danger: That's Herod's basic view of the world. The world is a dark place. It's full of cruelty and only the strong survive. Fear: that's his basic emotional state. Watch your back. You never know when someone will try to sneak up on you, to put one over on you, to get the upper hand and take your stuff. Aggression: that's his basic mode of action. If you want to win in this world you have to hit hard. If someone comes at you with a raised fist, come back at them with two. You can't be wimpy, you have to be merciless. Anything less is weak and naïve. That's Herod, right? He's always worried that someone is out for his power and his position, and when he identifies a specific person he thinks is a threat he hammers them. Herod thinks that toddler in Bethlehem is a threat, by the time chapter two is over he will calmly send soldiers to slaughter the children of Bethlehem. Do any further reading about Herod and you will see that's pretty typical for him. At various times, out of fear and self-protection he kills a wife, a brother-in-law, and three of his own sons. Danger. Fear. Aggression. Here's the scary thing...do you know what they called Herod in his day. Herod the Great. There will always be people who worship and admire this kind of power.

The little boy before whom the magi lay their treasure represents a very different Kingdom. A kingdom of blessing, hope and sacrificial love. Blessing: that's the worldview. The world is good. God loves this world and he loves us. We are his children! Hope: that's the basic attitude. God is faithful and he will keep his promises. There will be a good ending for the world

and for us. Sacrificial love: that's the basic mode of action. We love others and seek their blessing even when it costs us, because one of the most beautiful things you can do is love someone so much that you are willing to sacrifice a little of yourself for them. That kind of love is the most powerful force in the universe. And that's King Jesus, right? In complete trust of his Father, out of the immeasurable riches of his love, he pours himself out for us. He dies on the cross for us and for our salvation. It's the opposite of Herod. Herod would kill his own sons to preserve his power. Jesus would give up his own life to save a wretch like me and like you. Blessing. Hope Sacrificial love.

There's another place where Jesus himself summarizes the difference between the two kings. Later on Jesus will preach a sermon on the side of a mountain and he will say: *"No one lights a lamp and puts it under a bowl, instead they put it on a stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others."* That's his gospel. Blessing! Hope! Love! Herod would never preach that. If Herod were preaching his life philosophy on that mountain, he would say, *"Put your light under a reflective bowl; that way you can get the maximum benefit from your own light and heat. If you put your light right out there, you're too vulnerable. Someone will take advantage of you. Someone will try to blow you out and try to take over your lampstand. So let your light shine before only your most trusted associates. And if you can make your flame roar like a consuming fire so that the world will never want to mess with you."* The two kings are the center of the story and the question facing the magi is, "which of these two kings will get their allegiance?" Before which king will they bow and give their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Will they fall down before Herod, or will they go home by another way?

This clash of the two kings isn't just something that happens here in Matthew 2. These two sides come together throughout the New Testament. You see it in Acts 6 when Stephen is seized by the aggressive powers of Jerusalem. You see it in Acts 12 when another King Herod, a different one, seizes Peter and puts him in jail. You see it at the end of Acts when the powers of Rome put Paul in chains and drag him off to stand before the emperor. In each of these stories the power of Herod comes against the power of Jesus. In each of these stories the power of Jesus looks small and vulnerable – like it will be snuffed. And yet in each of these stories, the power of Jesus, the power of sacrificial love, and vulnerability and humility and gentleness and hope, survives and grows. We see the end of the story of the two kings in Revelation 21:24. The war is over. The powers of danger, fear and aggression have been defeated. The beast, who represents the power of empire throughout the ages, has been defeated and destroyed. And now the New Jerusalem has come down from heaven, the gates of the city have been opened, and who do we see coming in? The kings. The kings are back. They bring their treasure to the feet of Jesus! There is no more danger or fear or aggression: there is only king Jesus reigning on the throne, reigning in blessing and hope and love.

That's the end of the story, but we haven't reached that good end yet. We know the end of the story, but we see it only by faith. For now, we still live in between the struggle of the two kings. Every day, dozens of times a day, we face a choice: do we open our treasure before the power of danger, fear and aggression, or before the power of Jesus? It can be a struggle. Even though we are citizens of Christ's Kingdom, even though we are his children, even though the King has placed his Spirit in our hearts, do we sometimes live out of anger, fear and aggression? Yes. Absolutely. Fortunately, our King is merciful. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And along the way, he keeps giving us signs that that his love will triumph in the end.

I wonder how many of you know the story of Napalm girl. Have you heard this story? It was written up in Wall Street Journal two years ago. It's the story of Kim Phuc Phan Thi, a 55 year old Vietnamese woman who lives in Toronto. In the article, she calls herself the Napalm girl because she is the girl in that horrific 1972 photo taken in the midst of the Vietnam War. It was a Pulitzer Prize winning image. Kim is 9 years old in the picture. She's running down a road with her arms outstretched like this. She is completely naked and she is screaming. Behind her is her village. It's engulfed in a cloud of fire brought on by Napalm. Kim is naked because the Napalm has burned the clothes from her body. Behind her there's a soldier with no expression on his face watching her run. I'll bet most of you remember that picture. It was an iconic image of the terror and hopelessness of that war. One look at that picture gave you the sense that danger, fear and aggression, brought on by the clash of empires, which were taking over this world and engulfing it in fear and fire.

Kim survived that attack and carved out a life in post-war Vietnam. She was badly injured and deals with daily pain. Worse than the physical pain were the emotional scars. By her own description, Kim was a prisoner of hatred and bitterness. But then, on Christmas Eve, 1982 Kim attended a worship service at a small Vietnamese church. The minister there gave a sermon in which he pointed Kim to Jesus. The pastor said that this little baby was God's gift of love for humankind. Through Jesus we could find love and hope. Something shifted inside her. When she woke the next morning, Christmas morning, the pain was gone. She felt peace. Here's how she put it, "I know what it is like to experience terror, to feel despondent, to live in fear. I know how wearying and hopeless life can be sometimes. After years in the spiritual wilderness, I felt the kind of healing that can only come from God." She's describing what it feels like to move from one kingdom to the other; to move from Herod to Jesus, to move from danger, fear and aggression, to blessing, hope and love. I see this story as a sign: the power of Herod can seem overwhelming in this world, but the power of Jesus is stronger.

This week you will face dozens of situations where the two kingdoms will be competing for your attention. Remember whose child you are. Remember to whom you belong. And tonight, before you get out there, in the quiet of this place, look again at the candle of Christ your king, remember the unshakeable power that it represents, and light your candle from its fire so that you can go out into the world in blessing, and hope, and love.

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