

December 9, 2012
The National Presbyterian Church

Kings: The Right to Rule

Matthew 2:1-12

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Let me read few more short scripture passages before the sermon this morning that will help set the Biblical context for the story of the Wise Men:

- First of all from the Old Testament Book of Numbers (24:17) going back to the time of Moses some 1400 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ; the Oracle of Balaam who says *‘I see him but not now. I behold him but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter; royal power shall rise out of Israel.’*
- And then in Isaiah (60:2) you’ll find these words, speaking of the time when the Messiah comes, *‘The Lord will arise upon you and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.’*
- And then in Psalm 72, the Psalmist writes about the coming days of the Messiah: *‘May he have dominion from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the Earth. May his foes bow down before him and his enemies lick the dust. May the kings of Tarshish and the Isles [DR: Tarshish refers to countries in the West] render him tribute and may the kings of Sheba and Seba [DR: Sheba and Seba are in the East] bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.’*
- And then one more verse from Matthew 2 (v.16): *‘When Herod saw that he’d been tricked by the Wise Men he was infuriated and sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under according to the time that he had learned from the Wise Men.’*

In our sermons in these weeks that we call “Advent,” the weeks leading up to Christmas, we’re looking at different groups of people, different characters who find their place in the greater story of Jesus’ birth.

- So last week for example we looked together at the prophets – those people who lived, some of them a long time before Jesus, and who spoke about one

who was to come into this world. God's person, God's servant, to help His people, help them to face judgment, to be accountable before God and to help them to be ambassadors of God's kingdom on while on earth, and to lead them ultimately into God's eternal kingdom. So we looked to the Prophets last week.

- Next Sunday we're going to look at the shepherds who were the first ones invited to come to the manger – unnoticed by people but privileged by God to be the first invited to see this one who was born to be the Savior of the world.

This week we're looking together at those in the story who were understood to be kings, whether directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly – the people in the story at the opposite end of the social spectrum from the shepherds.

- There is King Herod who, as we just read, wants the child to die.
- There are the Magi, the Wise Men, who, in the light of the Old Testament prophetic texts, were understood to be kings (*the "Three Kings" we call them – though we're not told how many there are. They just bring three gifts! According to Isaiah 60, and according to the Psalmist, it is "kings" who offer their gifts to him.*)
- And then there is the baby Jesus himself, who in our passage is called the "King of the Jews," though we know Him to be greater than that – the King of the whole world.

All of these come together in the opening verses of our passage in Matthew 2. So let me read once again the first three verses:

In the time of King Herod, after [let me add: King] Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men [Kings] from the East, came to Jerusalem asking where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising or in the East and have come to pay him homage [DR: or, the word in Greek is 'proskunō' which literally means 'to worship him.']

Three kings or three sets of kings!

Now what is striking to me as I read this passage of scripture with these different groups within it is that each of these kings are different, very different from each other. Herod is different from the Wise Men, the three kings. The three kings are different from the baby Jesus, King Jesus. And King Jesus is different from King Herod – *especially in the way that they wield power and the way that they exercise their right to rule.* And it's this difference that I'd like us to reflect on this morning: Kings; power; the use of power; the abuse of power; different types of power; the way that power is wielded by them, and then by us.

King Herod. Of all the kings in our story in Matthew Chapter 2, King Herod is, I suppose, the most traditional 'ancient kind' of king – history calls him "Herod the Great."

Sometimes the scripture seems to be confusing. There's another Herod, in fact Herod the Great's son, who appears later in Jesus' story, with Pontius Pilate when Jesus is put to death. The name 'Herod' was common at that time. But 'Herod the Great' was the father of the Herod who helped put Jesus to death; Herod the Great is the one who is in our story here.

He was a vassal king of the Romans, ruling the province of Judea in one way or another for some 40 years or so, until and just beyond the time of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. His life was filled with political intrigue. He was a friend of Anthony and Cleopatra – yes the real Anthony and Cleopatra. Not just a friend of Cleopatra, he had a son by Cleopatra. He was a general, a good general on the field of battle; and he used his wealth and his power to try to win friends – I'm not quite sure that he had any real friends, friends who really trusted him – to win friends and influence people. He built palaces for himself; perhaps the most famous is on a mountaintop called Masada, in the Dead Sea desert. He built a great port at a place called Caesarea (deciding, in a politically shrewd move, to name it after the Roman emperor). And for the Jewish people, to win their allegiance he expanded and renovated the great temple in Jerusalem, turning it into one of the great wonders, architectural wonders, of the ancient world. And whenever anybody threatened his power, got in his way in any way, shape or form, well this Herod, Herod the Great, had no qualms at all about getting rid of them. The Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities* XVII), writing about one hundred years after Herod's death – not a Christian, so no one can accuse him of trying to confirm Christian sources – tells us that Herod was willing to kill three of his sons and one of his wives (better watch out!) when he thought that they were a threat to his power.

This is quite in keeping with our vision of him that comes to us in the 2nd Chapter of Matthew. The Wise Men come; they say there's another King. Herod asks where this King is. He finds out from his own wise men that he's in Bethlehem. To the wise men he says, "Come back later and let me know where you find him because I want to worship him." The wise men know not to do this, and what we discover as the story concludes is that when the Wise Men go home without reporting back to Herod. He grows furious, and sends his troops to Bethlehem to kill every, every baby who could possibly be a threat to him.

Josephus is quite consistent with the secular record. The late Jewish scholar Samuel Sandmel sums up Herod the Great's life like this (*Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, art. "Herod the Great"):¹

The murders, the violence, the usurpation of the throne by Herod are acts not capable of being condoned. The deadly struggles in Judea parallel those in Rome itself and duplicated those in other Roman provinces. What can be said in greatest condemnation of Herod was not that he was worse than or different from other provincial kings but that he was fully as bad as they were. An adherence to Jewish ethics or fidelity to Jewish law or standards [DR: and Herod is nominally

Jewish], there is not one trace in Josephus' account. On the contrary there are a number of passages which reflect his indifference and his unconcern.

So power to Herod had to do with force and coercion and manipulation.

The Three Kings/Wise Men/Magi. Whereas to the three kings from the East, well it all had to do with knowledge: knowledge, though, of a higher authority or a 'higher power' (as people in Alcoholics Anonymous would say), a higher authority or a higher power who manifested that authority in the orderliness and laws of the heavens. They found themselves giving their lives in submission to this other authority. Powerful as they were, they chose to live under another greater authority.

The truth is, overall we know very little about these people (see, e.g., *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*, "Magi").

We know that they weren't Jews. We know that they had no prior allegiance to the God of Israel. But they were wealthy. They bring these great gifts to Jesus. They open up (Matthew 2:11) their "treasure chest" for Jesus! We don't know how large the chest is but they offered their treasure, their wealth to Jesus – the most precious things they could think of. They had time on their hands to travel. They had time on their hands to study so they clearly had wealth and they had knowledge.

According to the Roman statesman and orator Cicero who lived at the same time as Herod the Great, the Magi as a category of people, were scattered through the Roman Empire. They were the scientists of their age. Some of them were magicians (magi→magi-cians). Some of them believed in the supernatural. Some of them are just the most intelligent people around on whom you relied.

But these ones, these ones, as with the Psalmist who wrote Psalm 19, when they looked at the heavens believed that "the heavens declared the glory of God." That is, they believed that the heavens spoke though the amazing way that they were ordered. The laws of the planets and the stars pointed to one above or beyond the created order, to whom they submitted their lives. So when they saw some kind of an astronomical event that they had never seen before (and we don't know what exactly it was, though some scientists and astronomers speculate;

see, e.g.,

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3077385/ns/technology_and_science-science/t/astronomers-still-wondering-about-star-wonder/#.UPgI3B0s7bM

when they understood it as pointing to a newborn king in Israel (perhaps because they had read the sacred documents of ancient Israel that pointed to a star that will rise out of Jacob' – we don't know how they put two-and-two together), what we know is that they were willing to drop everything and go, seeking the one to whom the star pointed. To put it another way:

They were powerful and influential and wealthy. They could have used all those things in whatever manner they chose. They could have used their wealth to try to bribe, to manipulate, to control this baby or his parents when they came and found him.

But there is no sense of this at all in the story. Instead *they chose to submit themselves to another, to use their resources to give their resources away to another, to give up control over their own path in life to another*. And our passage says that in so doing they found something that no money can buy; *they found great joy*: “When they saw that the star had stopped (we read at Chapter 2 in verse 10), they were overwhelmed with joy. These powerful people, these wealthy people, these intelligent people “On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they knelt down and paid him homage (they worshiped him), then opening their treasure chest they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And then having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod they left for their own country by another road.

So here we have Herod: Herod sees power in terms of force and coercion and manipulation.

And then we have the Magi, the wise men, the three kings: they see power as being real but as ultimately belonging to someone else. Whatever power they have is to be exercised with humility as stewards in submission to one is higher than they are, who calls the shots over all their brain power, over all their time and over all their wealth.

King Jesus. And then finally in the story we have the third king, King Jesus, who when we see him in the story doesn't look like a king at all. Herod is strong, Wise Men are wealthy, but Jesus is just a baby. He's utterly weak, he's utterly poor; he's at the mercy of everybody else in the story. He's at the mercy of Herod; he's at the mercy of the Wise Men; he is at the mercy even of his own parents. And yet according to Matthew he's not only the King of the Jews, (and that's what he is explicitly called in our passage), but he is the King of the whole wide world. Matthew 1 comes before Matthew 2 (!) and in Matthew Chapter 1 he is called *Emmanuel* – Hebrew for “God with us” – clothed in human flesh, the source of all power, greater than any earthquake or tsunami or hurricane.

I don't know but some of the early estimates from hurricane Sandy (that struck the Northeast United States in late October) is that within 24 hours somewhere over 50 billion dollars worth of damage was done. That's power used negatively. But that *is* power.

I don't know if you've ever been to Niagara Falls or some other place where you have been in the face of power, and suddenly felt how small you are in the light of something else which is great. Well, that greatness, says Matthew, is lying there clothed in human flesh as a baby; that power is lying there clothed in human flesh.

I find this to be one of the most amazing declarations that has ever been written. Almost all scholars think that Matthew's gospel was written somewhere between 40 and 50 years or so after Jesus' life and death and resurrection (so that's around AD 70 or AD 80). What we tend to forget is that *at that time* the church of Jesus Christ was nothing. It was just a scattered group of people here and there. There were no great church buildings like this gorgeous sanctuary in which we are worshipping today. There were no monuments to Jesus: to the outside observer he was merely a Jewish peasant who, along with others, had been crushed by the Romans. The movement was small, it was fledgling. In AD 70, the Romans crushed the city of Jerusalem to quell a revolt by the Jews. They used their power like Herod to crush others. And it would look to any outside observer that the small movement would die and its leader would be forgotten. But it's *at that time* that Matthew says, in effect, *"I'm going to write this down, the story of Jesus the King, so that others can read, so that others can see true power; the power I see in the world all around me is not always as it seems. Bundled up there in swaddling clothes, in flesh and blood, is power itself, the . And yet, he says, willing to let it all go. Not holding onto it, not grasping it, not claiming it, but willing to let it go even to the point of death."*

The only other place in the gospels where Jesus is explicitly called "King of the Jews," by the way, is when he is hanging on the cross. Those early Christians understood that it was even in the manger and on the cross, at the points of greatest weakness that Jesus exercised his royal power.

It is through those moments of 'incarnation' and 'crucifixion' that God through Jesus saves the world from sin, and calls us into the family of God - calls even the Herods of the world into the family of God, calls the Wise Men of the world, into the family of God – it is in his powerlessness that he wields his power; letting his power go he becomes the Savior of the world, and changes history forever. And Matthew grasps this by an incredible act of faith: that in days to come, the story of history would revolve not around the most obvious characters, around Herod or the Wise Men, but around this baby, born in the manger.

Our Power and call 'to Rule.' This is the story that he shares with us and it surely forces us to ask questions about our lives as well and our perceptions of power in this world in which we live and our use of power in this world in which we live. Whether we perceive ourselves as powerful or not we are all more powerful than we think. How should we think of power? We've been called to be sons and daughters of the . We've all been given a right to rule and influence this world in some sphere or another. How are we to exercise that right? How should we wield power or think about it?

Herod Type Power: Brute Force. Well let's go back to our three kings or three sets of kings and think first of all about Herod. Sometimes there is no question, in an evil world there is a role for brute force and coercion. The scriptures tell us that God has given to governments the right to bear the sword (Romans 13). In an evil world there is time for this.

While Jesus is the Prince of Peace I don't believe there is evidence that he was ultimately a pacifist, that he was naïve or not real. The Prince of Peace, yes. But when he meets Roman soldiers for example, Centurions who want their servants to be healed, he doesn't say to them I won't heal your servant until you lay down your arms. He doesn't mention anything about that. They have their job to do, Caesar has his job to do, God has his job to do as well. So there's a time for that kind of power.

Three Kings Type Power. But always that kind of power must be exercised in the light of the Three Kings, the Wise Men. Power is to be exercised, at least by Christians, in the knowledge that *there is one whose power makes all our power look trivial and weak*; in the light of one who gives to us power and we are to use it, whatever power we have, as stewards of this great God to whom we have been called to submit. Lose that sense of humility and stewardship, and we are no longer wise men or women. When we lose that sense of humility in the face of power, power backfires in a moment. Power, as Lord Acton said, "tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." But we do not and never can wield absolute power; it is always power wielded under the greater power of another.

When men who thought they were powerful came to carry Jesus away to death, thinking "we with our power will destroy this man" God turned the tables on them! It was at that moment that Jesus would die for us in the eternal will of God. Brute force not used under the sway of one who is Almighty backfires so easily.

King Jesus Type Power. So sometimes King Herod's forceful power is necessary. Always the three king's approach to power as humble stewards is crucial. But it's the image, it's the image of the King of Kings and his power, the one who is willing to become helpless as a baby that speaks the greater truth: that brute force and coercion, the trappings of wealth and intelligence, all that they can bring to us, as vital as those are, are not the most powerful forces on the face of this Earth.

Two hundred years ago Edward Bulwer Lytton wrote words which now are famous: *the pen is mightier than the sword.*

But 2000 years ago King Jesus the baby cried out from the manger saying there is a greater power than what looks like power to most people – it takes the form of love and forgiveness and respect and persistence and humility and sacrifice and praise and patience and a hundred other virtues which are open for you and me to yield in service to our Creator King and to our Savior King.

This is where power lies – sometimes in peace and sometimes even in war. Some of you may have seen the most recent Lincoln movie, based in part on Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals*.² She speaks about the way that Abraham Lincoln wielded and understood power. I think he got it. I think he understood

it. She speaks in one particular passage of the way he wielded power when the Emancipation Proclamation was on the table and the Civil War was looming, and when Lincoln had a sense of what to do, or, in particular, what not to do: to move too quickly would be to lose everything and so he took his time, no matter how others were pressing in on him. And so he wrote this: *'a man watches his pear tree day after day impatient for the ripening of the fruit. Let him attempt to force the process, to use power in that way, and he may spoil both fruit and tree. But let him patiently wait and the right pear at length falls into his lap.'*

That is what happens in our history here. This is what happened in the history of the world with our King Jesus. Each king in the story was powerful in their own way, and so too are you and I – more powerful than we know.

- Some wield power which has to do with force and coercion in this world of ours.
- Some wield power that has to do with wealth and intelligence in this world of ours.
- Some wield power with arrogance, and some as humble stewards of a gift entrusted to them.
- But all of us can wield power which has to do with love and mercy and grace and patience and perseverance and all the virtues that we associate with the King of Peace.

And we have been called to use whatever power we have; we've been called to use it in this world for the sake of God, under his sway, who emptied himself in order to lift us up as sons and daughters of the King of Kings. May God help us so to do.

1 *The Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible*. Abingdon Press (1984).

2 Goodwin, Doris Kearns. *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. Simon & Shuster (September 26, 2006).

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