

“Where Is The King?”

Matthew 2:1-23

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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In the year 1776, a group of men representing the thirteen British colonies in North America adopted the Declaration of Independence, declaring their independence from Great Britain. What began that hot summer in Philadelphia has changed the world forever.

We are now 236 years into what has been called the American Experiment. The reason that the American form of government is called an experiment is because it was such a radical new way of governing. The idea of allowing the people to govern themselves was virtually unheard of in the 18th century. Almost universally around the world people were governed by systems of royalty, kings and queens, who divided up the land among their selected nobility. The vast majority of people in the world were subjects of a small minority.

But our founding fathers created a different kind of system where the power to govern was vested with the people themselves. With only a few exceptions, this was a unique way to govern. Americans would not be subject to a king. Actually, that's not quite true. The guiding principle behind the creation of our form of government was founding fathers' belief that we are already subject to a king – Jesus Christ – and that it is God's laws that we must ultimately obey. Because of their faith they knew that earthly kings were almost always at odds with the true king. And as it turns out, that's exactly the scenario we find in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew 2 begins, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?’”

Several years ago over in east Texas a teacher had her children draw pictures of the nativity scene. As the teacher was looking at the artwork she stopped at one little boy's picture. All of the usual characters were there – Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the Shepherds and Wise Men – but on the side of the stable the boy had drawn a bright red fire truck. When the teacher asked him why he included a fire truck, the boy proudly answered, “because my Sunday School teacher taught us that the wise men came from a'far.”

Well they certainly came from a'far, but I'm not sure they were driving a “far” truck. So who were these wise men and why were they looking for a new king? Matthew tells us they were “magi,” often translated as “wise men.” These were the educated scholars of the day in what is now Iraq or Iran. It was then Babylon or Persia where they would have had contact with Jewish exiles and heard about the coming Messiah. Much of the book of Daniel in the Old Testament is about Daniel's interaction with the Magi in Babylon. At the time of Jesus' birth, these Magi were astrologers and astrology was considered both a science and a religion. These ancient people believed that the stars foretold and even controlled events on earth. The astrologers were widely regarded as able to recognize the signs of the times and to foretell events of world importance like the rise of kings.

Several ancient writings tell us that at the time there was an expectation that a new ruler would be born in Judea who would bring about a time of peace. Apparently the wise men knew of this and watched the stars for a sign. And then there it was. Whether it was a comet or more

likely the alignment of planets within certain constellations, to these astrologers it was the sign that the new king had been born in Israel and the evidence compelled them to go.

The Bible doesn't tell us very much about these wise men. Matthew is not interested in how many there were, or how far they traveled, or details about the star. Instead, what we do know is that from the very beginning of the story of Jesus, Gentiles came to worship the Jewish Messiah, fulfilling what God had told Abraham, that he would be a blessing to all the nations.

The other thing Matthew is interested in is the significance of the gifts that the Magi brought. Verse 11 says, "And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh." So let's look at each of these.

First, Gold was the metal of kings. One commentator noted that "it was the custom in Persia that no one could approach a king without a gift and that gold, the king of metals, was the proper gift for a king of men." By bringing a gift of gold the wise men were acknowledging Jesus as a king, the King of kings.

The second gift was Frankincense, a type of incense that was used in worship in the Temple. Whether they knew it or not, by giving incense to Jesus the Magi were pointing to Christ as our great High Priest, the one who lived a perfect life that was pleasing to his Father.

The third gift is probably the strangest in our minds: Myrrh. Because myrrh was commonly used in embalming, James Boice, in his commentary, calls this "the gift of death." He writes, "Just as gold spoke of

Christ's kingship and incense spoke of the perfection of his life, myrrh spoke of his death... Jesus came to suffer for our sin, and his suffering was symbolized by the Magi's gift of myrrh." Here at the beginning, Matthew wants to make sure that we understand that Jesus is the true king in the line of David, that he's the Holy One of Israel, the Messiah, and that our salvation comes through Jesus' death and resurrection.

The only words that the Bible records the Magi saying are in verse 2: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." The rest of the Gospel of Matthew is an effort to answer that question. Where is the king? In today's readings, Matthew provides us with three different answers to the question, "where is the king?" and all three come from Scripture. Where is the Messiah born? In verse 5 the Chief Priests and scribes answer, "In Bethlehem of Judea," and they quote from Micah 5:2. After the wise men visit, the answer is Egypt as God protects Jesus and his family. And after they return from Egypt a couple of years later, the answer is Nazareth in Galilee.

The other theme we find in chapter two that will be prominent through the entire book of Matthew is Jesus as the new (and better) Moses. The story of Herod murdering the male children in Bethlehem in an effort to destroy Jesus very closely parallels the story of Pharaoh killing the male children in Egypt at the time of Moses' birth. As a young child Jesus will return to Israel from Egypt and then, as we will see next week, in his baptism he will pass through the water just as the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and the Jordan River to get to the Promised Land. So not only does Jesus culminate the history of Israel, he also

repeats it, which is why Matthew is able to say that Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecies that were originally about the nation of Israel.

As we look at this story it seems to me that there are basically three responses to Jesus. We have the cruel, suspicious king Herod, who responds with anger and rejection. Toward the end of his 36-year reign, Herod became increasingly cruel. Suspicious that his own family was plotting his overthrow, he had his wife, mother and 3 sons murdered. When he realized that the magi had deceived him, he proceeded to turn his evil on the young boys of nearby Bethlehem. Herod knew that if a king were born, he would be appointed by God to restore the throne of David. In an attempt to stop this new king, Herod wages war on God. We still find people in the world who hate God so much that they are willing to attack followers of Jesus. But the Bible never tells us to attack back. We are to respond with love.

The second response is that of the Scribes and Chief Priests, the “religious” people of the day. Their response is indifference. They knew the Scriptures about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. But even though these Wise Men came with stories about the King of the Jews being born, they can’t be bothered to go see for themselves. They had the knowledge but that knowledge failed to

produce action. Sadly many of us are in danger of doing the same thing. We know all about Jesus but too often it doesn’t change our actions. When Jesus calls us to minister to the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the lonely, we find that we can’t be bothered. We’re just not interested. Maybe some other time.

Which leads us to the third response: the Magi. They had the least amount of knowledge and had the greatest obstacles, but they put the little knowledge they had about the Messiah to work. They traveled a great distance at tremendous risk in order to worship. They were actively searching for the Christ and they found him. Friends, I can honestly tell you that if you seek the Lord you will find Him. You don’t have to have all the answers, only the desire to know the truth. Ask Jesus to reveal himself to you, and go where you can find Him – in His Word. That’s what we’re going to do as we study the Gospel of Matthew together this year.

So my question for you today is this: Who is the King in your life? Are you still trying to have your own little kingdom of “me,” or are you willing to set out, following God’s leading, asking, “Where is the King of kings, and Lord of lords?” And what difference is it making in your life today?

Amen