

Isaiah 60:1-7

Matthew 2:1-23

January 2, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WE FIVE KINGS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I said in my Christmas Eve sermon, our 2021 Christmas pageant had everything you would expect: Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, donkeys, and baby Jesus in a manger. Of course, we didn't have any children in bathrobes with crowns on their heads coming down the aisle. That's because the pageant was based on the Christmas story in Luke's gospel — and the wise men are found in Matthew's Christmas story, as we heard this morning.

A few days before Christmas, I saw an interesting post on Facebook about Christmas pageants. It was posted by an Episcopal bishop and credited to an Episcopal priest in Seattle. The bishop wrote, "If you're responsible for your parish's Christmas play, it's not too late to change plans . . . this gave me a laugh and some ideas for next year." Then the bishop shared the priest's post. I'll only read the introduction and the part about Matthew's story. "I dream of a world where we encourage biblical literacy by doing a nativity pageant each year based exclusively on only one of the four Gospels, instead of a mishmash. Matthew: full scale retellings of each person in the genealogy, including Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. (This is the longest one.) Mary is then 'found' to be pregnant, Joseph tells the audience that he's going to divorce her, he falls asleep. An angel harangues him in his dreams. He doesn't divorce her, and takes her home kind of crankily. They have a baby. Some Magi come and ask the despot ruler about a powerful baby just born. Herod freaks out and consults all his spies. The Magi head out again, find the baby, worship him, and avoid Herod on the way home. An angel comes back to harass Joseph while he sleeps, telling him to run for his life, because Herod is grumpy. They make it to Egypt. All boy children under two are graphically murdered (blood packets everywhere), lay all over the space, spattered with red. Women scream for a long time. An angel tells Joseph in a dream that it's safe again, and they go back - but only to Nazareth, because it still isn't safe everywhere. The end."

That part at the end about Herod and the baby boys is probably why we usually only hear the first twelve verses of Matthew 2, and end the Christmas story with the wise men returning by another way to their own country. We focus on the mysterious wise men who glide through the story on their camels and disappear just as mysteriously as they showed up in Jerusalem. The only things we know about these visitors from Matthew's gospel are (1) they were magi or "wise men" from the East; (2) they observed the star of the king of the Jews at its rising; (3) they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; (4) they worshiped the child Jesus; and (5) they went home by

another route. That's what we know . . . but that's not all we think! Over the centuries, all sorts of traditions have developed about these "wise men" —

* by the 5th century, they were regularly referred to as "kings"

* in the West, they were named Gaspar (a king of India), Melchior (a king of Persia), and Balthazar (a king of Arabia); but in the East, Syrians, Ethiopians, and Armenians gave them different names

* there were "three kings," but that's only because Matthew names three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That tradition stuck in the West, but in the Eastern Christian tradition there were twelve wise men.

* According to one tradition, the magi were later baptized by the Apostle Thomas and became bishops.

* St. Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, supposedly found the remains of the wise men/kings and brought them to Constantinople.

* In 1895, Henry van Dyke wrote *The Story of the Other Wise Man*, about Artaban, who missed the caravan to Bethlehem and was delayed along the way because he stopped to help people in need, only to end up in Jerusalem thirty-three years later, in time to see the crucifixion of Jesus.

* In 1905, O. Henry wrote "The Gift of the Magi," about Della who cuts off her beautiful, long hair and sells it to buy a watch fob for her husband, Jim. Of course, Jim sells his beloved pocket watch in order to buy lovely hair combs for Della.

* In 1951, Gian Carlo Menotti's opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors," premiered on NBC from Rockefeller Center. The opera tells the story of a crippled boy and his mother who live near Bethlehem. They are visited by the three kings bearing gifts who seek shelter in their poor dwelling and are welcomed by Amahl and his mother. However, the mother tries to steal some of the gold meant for the baby Jesus. Nevertheless, at the end Amahl is blessed by the Christ child and healed.

Yes, we certainly know a lot about the three kings (we're even singing about them twice this morning!), but almost all of it is stuff we have made up to convey the message about the importance of giving. Now, there's nothing wrong with that! But the meaning of the visit of the wise men is even much deeper than the sentiments of an O. Henry story or a Menotti opera.

Thursday, January 6, is the Day of Epiphany. Some traditions call it "Old Christmas" or "Three Kings Day." It's the end of the Twelve Days of Christmas that we sing about. In church celebrations, it's also observed as the day that the Christ child was revealed to the Gentiles (sort of a counterpart to the angel in Luke's story telling the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy **for all the people**: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11) At the very beginning of Matthew, which is considered the most "Jewish" of the four gospels, we read about "three [Gentile] kings" bringing gifts and paying homage to the king of the Jews: "Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice: Alleluia! Alleluia! sounds through the earth and skies. O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!"

However, these three Gentile kings are bookended by two Jewish kings who are really the main characters in the story, despite our fascination with the night visitors. We're not surprised that Jesus king of the Jews is referred to the most in this story, since it's part of Matthew's longer Christmas story. But Herod king of the Jews is right behind him, at the beginning and at the end of the story — even after he is dead!

“Herod” was the name of a family with strong connections to the Roman government. There is a long history of “Herods” ruling over Israel and Judea. The Herod of the Christmas story is not the same Herod when Jesus is crucified. The Herod in today's story was ruthless in defending his throne. He built a number of wilderness fortresses for defense throughout what we call the Holy Land. But, to give you an idea of this Herod's character, he also used them as prisons. Occasionally he even locked up his own family members. History records that this King Herod ordered the execution of his wife Mariamne, two sons Alexander and Aristobulus, other members of his wife's family, and another son Antipater. As one source so bluntly puts it, “The king's well-known ruthlessness in defending his throne against any threat forms the background for the story of the massacre of Bethlehem's children.”¹ No wonder King Herod was frightened by the Gentile kings' question, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” and infuriated when he realized he had been tricked by the wise men. No wonder Joseph was afraid to return to Judea from Egypt, even after Herod had died.

This is the kind of world king Jesus was born into, a world full of King Herods. But the child born king of the Jews was and is no King Herod, nor is he only King of the Jews, as the night visitors' worship and gifts remind us. While King Herod was on his murderous rampage and his offspring were fighting for power after his death, King Jesus fulfilled God's ancient promise of the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of all the world.

While history remembers the cruelty and political maneuvering and self-interest of King Herod (and so many other kings and powerful people through the years), our faith sings this about King Jesus:

*Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never over us all to reign.
Frankincense to offer have I;
incense owns a deity nigh;
prayer and praising gladly raising,
worshiping God Most High.
Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

Many of you have enjoyed the Book of Hymns devotional book that Mollie Moore sent to our congregation. Appropriately, the hymn for January 6 is “We Three Kings.” The devotion reminds us that “Gold was a gift for a king. Frankincense was brought by

priests in their worship of God. Myrrh was a spice used in burial. Thus Jesus was honored by these sages as King, God, and Sacrifice.” Then the devotion applies the meaning of those gifts to our lives today. “How then shall we approach the King of kings? What gold shall we bring? What incense can we offer as priests of our God? How can we honor our crucified Lord?”²

We five kings —

* one long dead and gone, remembered for his cruelty and his bloodthirsty attempts to secure and hang on to his kingly power;

* three mysterious Gentile kings from the East who made the long journey to worship and bring gifts to the king of the Jews;

* and **the** King of kings, born on Bethlehem’s plain, grew up in the village of Nazareth, ministered in Galilee, died outside the city walls of Jerusalem, and raised again in glory by the power of God. As Handel’s glorious chorus proclaims, “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. King of kings and Lord of lords, forever and ever, Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”

In a world that is still full of Herods, how shall we approach the King of kings? If we don’t consider what Jesus’ birth means for our lives going forward, then all of our Christmas celebrations don’t amount to much, do they? During Advent, I have used some poems from Ann Weems’ book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. The book is divided into eleven sections, the first seven of which are: Advent; Pilgrimage; The Birth; The Stable; Angels; The Creche; and Faith. Then comes a section called “The World Still Knows,” which begins with a poem of the same name:

The night is still dark
and a procession of Herods still terrorize the earth,
killing the children to stay in power.
The world still knows its Herods,
but it also still knows men and women
who pack their dreams safely in their hearts
and set off toward Bethlehem,
faithful against all odds,
undeterred by fatigue or rejection,
to kneel to a child.

And the world still knows those persons
wise enough
to follow a star,

those who do not consider themselves too intelligent
too powerful
too wealthy
to kneel to a child.

And the world still knows those hearts so humble
that they're ready
to hear the word of a song
and to leave what they have, to go
to kneel to a child.

The night is still dark,
but by the light of the star,
even today,
we can still see
to kneel to a child.³

Let us pray: Eternal God, by a star you led magi to the worship of your Son. May his brightness illumine our lives, gladden our hearts, and give us grace to offer unending praise to you, in whom all things have their beginning and purpose, now and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "Herod," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, General Editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), p. 387.

²William J. Petersen and Randy Petersen, *The One Year Book of Hymns*, compiled and edited by Robert K. Brown and Mark R. Brown (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2017), p. 7.

³Ann Weems, "The World Still Knows," in *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 55.