

Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. Remember that Christmas is a season. The celebration continues. You can hear this in our hymns and readings. You can see it in the sanctuary. The Incarnation and Nativity are still fresh in our minds. The King has come. God has taken on our human flesh. And the Gospel story of our redemption begins.

In college, I read a book called *A Tale of Three Kings*, by Gene Edwards. It is still one of my favorites—although now I see some of its imperfections. But it is richly poetic and insightful regarding the human psyche and our response to God in the midst of our own brokenness. It is worth reading.

This book is not about the Magi. And, of course, the Magi weren't kings. And most likely, they weren't three in number. The book is about Saul, David, and Absalom, and how they respond to the Word of the Lord. And I think we can see something like this in our reading today. But this time it is *a tale of two kings*.

As Jesus becomes incarnate in Nazareth, and is born in Bethlehem, He comes as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, although He does so in great humility as we talked about at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service.

We would expect others who knew the Scriptures to come running to Jesus—the Priests and Scribes and Pharisees—maybe even the Sadducees. They should greet the Messiah as the promised King of the Jews.

Instead, we find the lowly shepherds greet Him. And then, a little later, the Magi—these heathen, pagan wise men—bow before the humble majesty of the Christ Child.

But I am getting ahead of the text—or really—behind the text. The assigned reading for the First Sunday of Christmas is the second half of Matthew 2. Next week, for Epiphany, we will hear the first half. So before we deal with the Magi, who came first, we deal with the Flight to Egypt and the Martyrdom of the Holy Innocents, which happened after.

And this brings us back to the two kings—each bringing both a way of thinking—and a way of living—worthy of our notice. This is the larger story throughout Matthew chapter two.

The first king is Herod—Herod the Great as he is known. The Roman Empire placed Herod as king in Judea. He isn't Jewish. He is an Edomite, a descendant of Jacob's brother Esau. But he is interested in the local religion in Judah. As John 2 suggests, Herod spends forty-six years remodeling and restoring the Jewish Temple.

And yet, like so many, his religious views don't make it into his heart or life. Herod is outraged in our Gospel reading. He is outraged by the threat to his throne. Herod is malevolent.

History remembers that he executed prominent rabbis. He kills members of his own family. Notice the disconnect between his religious interests and how he behaves. He claims to be spiritual, but his life is almost entirely evil.

Earlier in the Epiphany part of this chapter, Herod uses the Magi and the Jewish scribes to find the place and time of the birth of the other King. And although he says he intends to go and worship, he actually has plans to eliminate his competition. And just to make sure he wins, he kills all the male children in Bethlehem under two years of age.

These young lives became inconvenient to Herod's purposes, so he has them terminated. This is the nature of his reign. He has good and evil backwards. He is centered on himself. He protects his own purposes above all things. He keeps himself on his throne.

For us, these children should always be part of the Christmas story. It isn't the easiest reading to hear, especially here in the Christmas season, with all of its tidings of comfort and joy. But these young martyrs remind us of why Jesus came, not just as King—but as Savior. The world is pretty broken when children are needlessly murdered for the sake of power.

These children belong with St. John the Baptist—that we celebrated in Advent—and St. Stephen—that we commemorated on the day after Christmas. They are all killed for being aligned with Jesus. In the Church, the Holy Innocents are commemorated today—on December 28<sup>th</sup>.

So that's Herod. As we study his reign—and the shattered reign of his descendants—including Herod Antipas—who martyrs John the Baptist—and is complicit in Jesus' execution—we see a glimpse of politics at its worst. We think we have it bad. But this is surely much worse.

Herod doesn't serve the people, he serves himself. He lives for himself. Everything he seeks is for his own perceived good. He thinks that power is the highest goal. He flatters himself the king of the Jews. And Herod makes sure everyone knows it.

But remember, there is a second King in our story. And this is the King *the voices of the Prophets promised in their faithful word*. He is the King—the One God has chosen for His people. His power is set aside. He is born in obscurity and in poverty, laid in a manger. Even the community of Bethlehem has no room for Him.

And, as we have discussed, Herod is doing everything in his power to see this King dead. As much as two years may have passed with the Holy Family in Bethlehem. They had not returned to Nazareth yet. And an angel warns Joseph of the plot.

So, Joseph and Mary take Jesus and flee for Egypt, almost two hundred miles away—just like the descendants of Jacob—almost two thousand years earlier. The true King of the Jews is in exile in the land of Egypt.

But this was the plan. It always was. This was no accident. The great Prophet of old, Hosea, predicted, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." It had happened before. And now it is happening again. A guy named Joseph protected Israel in Egypt in both Testaments. And now, Jesus will be what Israel had failed to be, the presence of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Herod dies shortly after this massacre at Bethlehem. God's patience with him runs out. There are always limits. And God's justice takes over. Herod's power and reign is held accountable. And he certainly couldn't cheat death. And honestly, apart from his attempts to kill Jesus, he would be almost completely forgotten by history.

The reign of Jesus is far different. His use of power is different. The outcome of His life is different. He uses His power for good, rather than for Himself. He gives up Himself for the life of the world. Jesus, at His death—and because it is resolved in His resurrection—extended His reign to all creation—and for all eternity. He is the true King of the Jews—not Herod. And His reign is not limited to Judea—or even the Roman Empire. Instead, He rules over all things in heaven and on earth.

Jesus brought the Kingdom of God to us—and it remains. It still thrives in His Church—in hidden ways. And although it waits its full realization at the last day—it finds its place in our hearts in Word and Sacrament—in lives fully devoted to His purposes for the world—righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Jesus rules and reigns. And no one like Herod—or even the gates of hell—can thwart the kingdom of God.

So which king is yours? Herod or Jesus? It is not a bad question. And by that, I am not asking if you consider yourself a Herodian. Herod is dead. What I am asking is this, do you find your identity in the reign of Herod or in the reign of Christ?

It sounds like a simple question, but I think it is a little more complicated than we are willing to admit. Remember that Herod was a religious man. We still call the last Temple in Jerusalem, *Herod's Temple*. But his religion was merely external. It was shallow. It was all a show. He could call himself religious—and also murder the innocent children of Bethlehem.

There was such a large disconnect between his religion and the rest of his life—he actually thought it was a good idea to execute the Messiah. His religion should have informed his choices. The scribes had pointed him to Jesus. The Magi had pointed him to Jesus. But he was able to set all of that aside—and do this unspeakable evil.

So I am asking you today—is there a disconnect between your faith and life? Do you live like Herod? Maybe you aren't breathing murderous threats—but maybe your religion never actually makes it to your heart. It doesn't inform your lifestyle—your ideas—your conversations—or the orientation of your life. You have simply opted for the ways of the world, with a thin religious veneer for Sundays.

For so many people, religion is merely a surface thing. “Good people go to Church,” so they say. But it doesn't go with you when you leave the building. You sing *O Come All Ye Faithful* or *What Child Is This* or *Joy to the World*—but they aren't really your songs. Church is great and all—but it is not really telling your story. And that is the nature of the kingdom of Herod.

The good news is that Jesus came for people like Herod. Remember Jesus even interacts with Herod Antipas and Pontius Pilate who are caught up in similar perspectives as Herod the Great. As does John the Baptist.

But Jesus came to call power-hungry kings to repentance. He came for those lost in heathen astrology and paganism. He came for tax collectors, like Matthew. He came for sinners. He came for those who show up on an occasional Sunday, but don't really live in the Kingdom of God.

He came and was born in Bethlehem. He came and fulfilled all the Scriptures of the Old Testament Prophets. His family stole Him away to exile in Egypt. And out of Egypt, the Father called the Son. He parted the waters baptismally in the Jordan. He spent 40 days tempted in the wilderness wanderings.

All of this was anticipated by the Exodus event in the Old Testament. And here, Jesus fulfilled all that Israel was unable to do. He fulfills all righteousness for them and for us.

And this path in His kingdom led to His own Exodus—His Passover cross—and His substitutionary death as the Lamb of God—and to His glorious resurrection into the Promised Land that is to come. And all of this is for us and for our salvation.

So there are two kings in our story—a tale of two kings—two ways of living and believing. This is the next step for us this Christmas season. This is Jesus’ work in our midst. In repentance and faith, through these ancient Scriptures, through our historic liturgy, our profound hymns, we find Jesus pulling us out of Herod’s kingdom—out of Herod’s way of thinking and living—into the Kingdom of heaven—into the reign of Jesus.

Christ calls us to a different way. A deeper way. Not autonomy, but communion. Not self-made truth, but divine revelation. Not comfort, but the cross. And this leaves us with a question. Are we disciples in membership only—or also in our imagination—our understanding of the human condition—our way of seeing the world?

We are to be disciples—saints—holy ones—those set aside to God—and for the purposes of God. We are shaped in the hidden life—through silence, fasting, contemplation, confession. And we are shaped by the public life of faith and the vocations that God gives us—in the home—and in the Church, especially.

We wage war on our own passions. We practice a watchfulness of the heart. The Church calls us to descend—deeply—into the truth in our own hearts. Not to despair, but to repent. Not to accuse, but to be healed. There is no resurrection without the Cross. And the Cross always begins with the death of the ego.

And His kingdom changes us. We can no longer live in selfishness. We have no need to lust after power. Instead, we find glory in self-sacrifice. We find power in humility. We are full of forgiveness. We are obedient—with lives that look much more like Mary and Joseph. We are servants of the one true King.

We don’t need to live in Herod’s fear—and outrage. We find glory in not taking offense. We no longer need to think of ourselves at all—Christ watches out for us—and graciously gives us all we need. He conforms us to Himself. He forgives our sins.

So hear the good news today. Sing the good news. Embrace the hymns that we sing. Let them define you. Let them remind you of who you are. Ponder them in your heart. Find new life—find a new allegiance in His Word. Bow before the sovereignty of Christ. And live in His kingdom, which has no end. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*+Soli Deo Gloria+*