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2 Christmas A: Matthew 2:1-12

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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

*The Way of Herod or the Way of the Magi?*

This morning we hear the story of the magi, wise men from the east, and their visits to two kings – King Herod, and King Jesus. The story is a study in contrasts – between anxious grasping for power and true freedom, between fearful anxiety and true wisdom. In telling us this story, the evangelist Matthew invites us to choose – which way will we go through this life – with the petrified and dangerous self-absorption of Herod, or the wisdom of the magi?

First, let's meet the characters in the story.

By most accounts, Herod was a nasty man. As a man with power, he had the potential to do good, but he was consumed by jealousy and the desire for self-protection at all costs. He reigned as King of the Roman provinces of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria from 37 – 4 BCE.<sup>1</sup> In order to secure his own power, he arranged for the execution of his wife, his mother-in-law, and at least three of his own sons. If he saw a threat to his reign, real or imagined, he did whatever he felt necessary to destroy it. Herod may have been relentless in his pursuit of power, but he was not deceived in his sense of how he was regarded by others. According to one account, since he knew no one would be sad when he died, he arranged to have one hundred of the most prominent citizens in Jerusalem arrested. Upon Herod's death, they were to be executed, so that there would be mourning in Jerusalem when Herod died.

The magi were men of the priestly class of Persia. Their expertise was in astrology, ritual, and the interpretation of dreams. They are religious experts in their homeland, attune to the divine, seekers after the ways of the divine. They know about how to make sacrifices, incantations, spells, and charms. The magi in our story are following a star because they believe it

will guide them to the child who has been born King of the Jews. Matthew doesn't call them kings and he doesn't say how many there were. The idea of "three" probably comes from the number of the gifts. They are called kings starting in the fifth to sixth century.<sup>ii</sup> By the sixth century, they had been given names and descriptions – Caspar, meaning "Treasurer," is a beardless young man. Melchior means "King of Light," or "King of the City," and was a bearded old man. Balthasar means "god protect the king." Balthasar is black.<sup>iii</sup> By the eighth century, the three magi represented the three continents – Asia, Africa, and Europe.<sup>iv</sup> In Matthew's gospel, they are gentiles – outsiders, people from afar. In later tradition, then, they come to represent the whole known world, coming to worship Jesus.

Herod and the Magi – two different approaches to what's important and how to get there.

The magi come to Herod after the star has led them as far as Jerusalem. Since they are in the seat of royalty, they stop to inquire of Herod – surely he must know of this great auspicious birth. But he does not. This is our first clue that Herod is not truly worthy of regard as king. Herod may be called King of the Jews, but he doesn't know the Jewish scriptures. He calls his religious officials to ask them – what do the scriptures say? They tell him that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Herod passes this on to the magi and sends them ahead, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

Here's our second clue about Herod's true nature. He doesn't question the authenticity of the star. He doesn't question the authenticity of the scripture. But he is so certain of his own importance that he doesn't even go with the magi to see the child. He is so busy safe-guarding his own power, that he won't even go see the one who may be the long-awaited Messiah. As one writer says, "Herod is the prototype of those who spend time, energy, and talents in protecting their illusions. . . he is so consumed by self-protecting ambition that he cannot stop everything in his life long enough to marvel at the portent in which he nevertheless believes. He would try to snuff out the sun itself if that would allow him to go on existing as before – the undisturbed master of his fortunes – even if his eyes and ears and the witness of others prove him wrong."<sup>v</sup> He would rather stay in Jerusalem, to send others to do his bidding, to turn his magi guests into his servants – go, do this and that, and then come back and tell me. He would rather have second-hand hearsay than risk losing his place, his power, his

resting as the still point of his own universe around which everything else must turn. Of course we know that Herod is up to no good in his seemingly innocent commanding of the magi – go, search, find, then come back and tell me, that I may also go and pay him homage. We know that his motives were not pure, his desires most unholy. Operating under the cover of secret, Herod calls the magi. He wants to locate the child only to remove him as a threat to Herod's power. He believes that his power cannot stay intact if someone else has power. So he sits, immobilized by his own fear, his own thirst for power. What impoverishment we see when we look at Herod. He is not searching for the Messiah, and so would miss him if the magi hadn't come to him. He is not hoping for God's truth, so he must spend time and energy weaving his own deception. He is not willing to risk any movement – even if he might get to see the Messiah King for himself.

How different is the way of the magi. They are willing to seek everywhere – the heavenly bodies in the sky, the palace of the king in Jerusalem, the wisdom of the Jewish scriptures and those who interpret them – to find the One they seek. Their way is marked by joy, not fear. They come and go as they need to, following the truth where it leads. When they find the holy child, they do not hesitate to worship. They kneel before the Christ child – a symbol of submission, an action of surrender, of turning oneself over to the object of adoration. They offer gifts that symbolize their faith in Jesus as King, his worthiness to be worshipped, and the foresight that he will suffer on behalf of all people.

Herod is a picture of stuckness. Herod is frozen to a spot from which he dare not move, lest all he holds dear comes crumbling down around him. Fear and anxiety keep him immobilized. He can only use others, command, attempt to deceive. The magi are a picture of movement – seeking, following, going, asking, finding, rejoicing, kneeling, worshipping, opening, offering. Joy and the pursuit of divine truth keep them on the move. Not frantic movement -- guided, studied, thoughtful, and willing to stop when they have found Jesus.

And then - a picture of spiritual peace and sanity, the Magi go on their way, giving no assistance to Herod. They will not be caught up in his intrigues. They are free to seek, free to accept guidance, free to worship, and free to go.

Which way do we choose – King Herod's? Or the way of the magi?

Lest we choose too quickly, let's be honest. Would any of us really cast ourselves as Herod? I mean, we have never assassinated anyone. But, ever engaged in character assassination? Ever felt threatened by something new? Ever thought that our authority would be diminished if someone else had authority too? Ever used someone, or been tempted to use someone? Ever told even a small fib in order to keep our own self-image or our own position intact? Ever chosen staying put over taking a risk – a risk that might mean change or being changed?

And the way of the magi is not easy. They were people who had made a commitment to study, to seek, to discernment, to accept guidance. They were rooted in an ancient tradition, but open to encounter the God of Israel, the God of the Hebrew scripture. They were willing to risk that they would be welcome as outsiders into the embrace of Jesus and the holy family. They were willing to set out on a long journey, all the while paying attention. But the result: finding what they were searching for. Submission to the only one worth that honor. Pure, overwhelming joy.

Come, let us seek diligently, follow the guidance of true wisdom, and worship the true King.

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<sup>i</sup> Herod's death in 4 BCE is one of the reasons we date Jesus' birth to around 4-6 BCE. The calendar that was developed in the year 525, based on years Before Christ (BC) and the Year of our Lord (AD, Anno Domini), was slightly off in terms of Jesus' birth year.

<sup>ii</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007), 111.

<sup>iii</sup> Names and descriptions from Luz, 116. Meanings from word studies.

<sup>iv</sup> Luz, 108.

<sup>v</sup> Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, *Fire of Mercy Heart of the Word: Meditations on the Gospel according to Matthew* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 1996), 79-80.