

Greetings:

The study that Pastor Pat brings on Sunday mornings is a reflection of the study for that week. It represents a lot of research. Not all of what he has prepared is communicated. In an attempt to continue the learning process, he is making available his study notes to the congregation.

They are edited, but not “book” ready. To the critical eye mistakes can be found. So he asks that you take the material with humility, teach-ability, and charity.

Enjoy and if you should have any questions or corrections, please do not hesitate to email him at pastorpat@waukeshabible.org.

Date: January 3, 2009 - Epiphany Sunday

Title: Kingdoms in Conflict: The Visitation by the Magi

Text: Matthew 2:1-18

Theme: In the arrival of the Story’s Hero, humanity will have to determine before whom they will bow.

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Waukesha Bible Church is a family of families seeking to live in **the Storyline of the Bible**. She is determined by design to have a **God-centered, Christ-exalting worship; a Word-centered teaching** focused on personal **discipleship** through intentional and systematic instruction; a **Global-impacting mission** that resolves to be a **church planting church**; and a **Grace-based fellowship** where disciples are invited to live under a **reigning grace** characterized by a **Gospel-driven sanctification** that celebrates a divine **monergism** to the Christian life.

Waiting for His Arrival and the Storyline of the Bible

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Introduction:

Epiphany, the 12th day after Christmas, celebrates the visit of the three kings or wise men to the Christ Child, signifying the extension of salvation to the Gentiles. Epiphany falls on Wednesday, January 6, 2010. In most countries, including the United States, the celebration of Epiphany in 2010 is transferred to Sunday, January 3.

Epiphany is an ancient church festival celebrating the magi’s visit to the Christ Child (Matt. 2:1-12). It is kept on January 6. Epiphany is also called “Three Kings’ Day” and “Twelfth Day” – the latter name because January 6 is twelve days after Christmas; the eve of Epiphany is called “Twelfth Night.” It is celebrated mainly in Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and other liturgical churches.

The word epiphany means “manifestation” or “revelation.” Thus, the holiday celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the magi (see Simeon’s prophecy in Luke 2:32).

“The main purpose is to show the reception given by the world to the new-born Messianic King. Homage from afar, hostility at home; foreshadowing the fortunes of the new faith: reception by the Gentiles, rejection by the Jews”¹

Matthew tells the Story of God from a Jewish Kingly perspective. He presents and speaks of the Story’s Hero as a King whose rule and reign is real. “King” Herod knows this to be true and must destroy any and all who might threaten his kingdom. This is the context in which the Story is told, but often it is this aspect of the Story that is lost in the retelling.

“In his recent commentary on Matthew (2006), Stanley Hauerwas of Duke observes that sentimentality is one of the greatest enemies of understanding the gospel, especially the Christmas story and the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. What parent hasn’t gushed with pride watching his child play the part of a shepherd in a bathrobe or an angel with a coat hanger halo? I know that I have.

The gospel for this week disabuses us of all such Hallmark readings of the Bible. **The story of the pagan magi worshipping Jesus ends in carnage when King Herod slaughters innocent children in order to strengthen his rule.** This is an old story, retold many times in our own day, in which political powers annihilate their opposition to protect their power; it’s certainly not a story that you’d want to teach with a flannel graph in a children’s Sunday school [emphasis added].”²

I would like to consider Matthew 2. The narrative suggests the events transpired over an extended period of time ([up to two years] v. 16). In light of the Story and Matthew's intent I would like to consider it from the larger idea of how His arrival placed two Kingdoms in conflict and how this is the underlying theme of the entire Story.

It is filled with irony in so far that Israel's enemies would be those who seek the Christ child and His own people wish Him dead. It is a continuation of the contrasting seeds. The seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. But the serpent's seed will not go without war.

Advent Prayer: The Book of Common Prayer

O God, who by the leading of a star did manifest your only-begotten Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may behold your glory face to face; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*³

The Storyline:

From the Story's inception God placed in motion the tale of two seeds; one comes from the woman and the other from the serpent. These two seeds represent two kingdoms in conflict. Here is a picture of these two contrasting and competing kingdoms. The one is represented by the magi and the other by King Herod. For the reader there can be no doubt as to whose kingdom will prevail. The battle between the two highlights the magnitude of God's grace in loving those who reject Him and rebel against His kind intent.

The Problem:

We must struggle against our deep seated indifference and ignorance of the Story and place ourselves in the conflict. We must grapple with the systemic hatred the serpent's seed has for that of the woman's. God would come unto His own but His own would not receive Him (John 1:10-12).

¹⁰ "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. ¹¹ He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. ¹² But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:10-12).

"Not only did the world fail to know the Pre-incarnate Logos, but it failed to recognize him when he became Incarnate."⁴ God has and will redeem the world around us but let us never fail to remember that this world in its current state is warring against God. There is something diabolic at work in every moment of every day and we must not allow ourselves to fall asleep while in the Story.

Questions:

1. What do you believe to be Matthew's primary intent in providing this story for his readers?
2. Why is the inclusion of King Herod's carnage important for the Story's telling?
3. Why are magi from the East significant? How might they have come to believing faith?

4. Knowing the promises of God are sure, how does this temper what we read?
5. When the magi arrived in Jerusalem what do you think they might have expected to find concerning the birth of the Christ?
6. Why was Herod so afraid?
7. Who might be our contemporary *magi*?
8. Who might be our contemporary "Herods?"
9. How do we exclude pagan *magi* today?
10. What are the ways that we bow to "Herod" today?
11. Can you think of how the *magi* further "disclose" the nature of pagan religion and power politics?
12. Why must the church protect the seed of the woman? Is there any other option?

The Holy Spirit is calling to us from this passage to consider three ideas.

To Know: The Holy Spirit desires for us to know King Jesus has come and His kingdom is in conflict with the serpent's seed.

To Choose: The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose to believe and follow the promises made by the Shepherd King.

To Feel: The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of resting under His protective arm.

There are four primary ideas contained in our narrative that highlight a very specific thought. In the coming of the Story's Hero two Kingdoms will be in conflict. It is a conflict that began in the Garden (Gen. 3:15) and will, in this text, continue to teach the eternal conflict existing in the redeeming of slaves and adopting of sons and daughters.

Outline:

I. The inquiry of the Magi (v. 2)

"Where is the child? But first, who are these strangers seeking him, these 'wise men' who are much more, of course, than mere decoration for our nativity scene? They've come a long way to 'submit' to Jesus, the new king of the Judeans. In doing so, they're poking their finger in the eye of Rome and its puppets."⁵

"Their question is, *Where is he that is born king of the Jews?* They do not ask, *whether there were such a one born?* (they are sure of that, and speak of it with assurance, so strongly was it set home upon their hearts); but, *Where is he born?* Note, those who know *something* of Christ cannot but covet to *know more* of him. They call Christ the *King of the Jews*, for so the Messiah was expected to be: and he is Protector and Ruler of all the spiritual Israel, he is *born a King*. To this question they doubted not but to have a ready answer and to find all Jerusalem worshipping at the feet of this new king; but they come from door to door with this question, and no man can give them any information."⁶

"Doubtless these simple strangers expected all Jerusalem to be full of its new-born King, and the time, place, and circumstances of His birth to be familiar to every one. Little would they think that the first announcement of His birth would come from themselves, and still less

could they anticipate the startling, instead of transporting, effect which it would produce – else they would probably have sought their information regarding His birthplace in some other quarter.”⁷

There are four questions that can assist us in understanding their inclusion in the narrative.

A. Who were these Magi (vv. 1, 12)?

“The *magi* who traveled long and hard to worship Jesus with extravagant gifts remind us that He is not only the King of the Jews; he's the King of all nations and peoples. In contrast to our propensity to privilege one ethnicity or people (usually "mine") over another, to view one's own people as exceptional to God and others as at best unexceptional, and to exclude other people who are different (usually "yours"), the pagans from Persia show that God welcomes the worship and the gifts of all people everywhere. This is especially noteworthy in Matthew's gospel because he wrote for a specifically Jewish community.”⁸

They came from where their enemies would come. They came as a consequence of the Babylonian Captivity. They came as the consequence of God's judgment against the nation of Israel. Let us never assume that just because we do not understand the movement of God that He is not in control. Even when it would appear that nothing makes sense and sin seems to “win,” God is working all things for good.

“They were ‘very high ranking political-religious advisors to the rulers of the Median and then the Persian empires (roughly equivalent to the modern countries of Iran and Iraq).’”⁹

“Where do these strangers come from? They come from "the East" – the same direction from which most of Israel's conquerors approached, including Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. And there are more associations with the East, Richard Swanson says: "East of Judea is the Tigris and the Euphrates. East of Judea is the Garden of Eden. East of Judea is Ur of the Chaldees. East of Judea is Babylon, where Jews lived in Exile after the destruction of the first Temple. East of Judea is the Jewish community who stayed behind when Jews returned to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem..." These Magi, Swanson says, were among the Gentiles who might have been influenced by the remaining Jews, helped to sense the goodness of the One True God. "On this model, the Magi come from the East because they had been trained to raise their eyes to the horizon of God's activity in the world, trained by their association with the Babylonian Jewish community”¹⁰

B. How did they find Him (vv. 2, 9, 10)?

They followed a star. “The language is very strong, expressing exuberant transport.”¹¹

C. What did they bring (vv. 11, 12)?

"Frankincense" was an aromatic used in sacrificial offerings; "myrrh" was used in perfuming ointments. These, with the "gold" which they presented, seem to show that the offerers were persons in affluent circumstances."¹²

They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. "They presented themselves to him: *they fell down, and worshipped him*. We do not read that they gave such honor to Herod, though he was in the height of his royal grandeur; but to this babe they gave this honor, not only as to a king (then they would have done the same to Herod), but as to a God."¹³

"Gold, frankincense, and myrrh": In later tradition, gold came to signify the kingship of Christ, incense his deity, and myrrh his redemptive suffering."¹⁴

D. What were they seeking (vv. 2)?

How do we capture the emotion of this moment? Their lives were consumed in the pursuit of the promise and now it is fulfilled. It must be similar to that felt by Simeon who knew that before he died he would know the fulfillment of God's promise.

Who, where, how: we also ask "why" these strangers have made such a long and perilous journey (even their return trip started on a warning)? They were driven by their sense of an event so important and so powerful, something that drew them far from their home and called forth their generosity and their humble worship. In that age, we'd expect anyone who could afford to bring gold, frankincense and myrrh to be wealthy enough not to be in the habit of bowing down to little children in modest homes, in foreign lands. Once they reached their destination, they were "overwhelmed by joy," and then, what drew them far from home sent them back again. But why does Matthew tell us this story? That "why" is just as important as why the Magi set out on their journey. Matthew wants his audience to hear about the Good News of God's universal and all-encompassing grace, even if they're offended or even appalled that such "objectionable" people are included in the story. Scott Hoezee puts it this way: "What Matthew may be trying to convey, however, is **the reach of grace**. Matthew is giving a Gospel sneak preview: the Christ child who attracted these odd Magi to his cradle will later have the same magnetic effect on Samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors on the take, despised Roman soldiers, and ostracized lepers" (*Lectionary Commentary*). Matthew writes his Gospel in light of the Jewish texts familiar to his audience, and he recalls that the prophet Isaiah described "the wealth of the nations" (read, Gentiles) coming to "you," bringing "gold and frankincense," and proclaiming the praise of the Lord [emphasis added].¹⁵

Throughout the Psalms and Prophets God promises a worshipper from every tongue, tribe, peoples and nations. This is what the angels and Simeon speak to in Luke 2:10-11, 30-32.

¹⁰ "But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be **for all the people**;¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10, 11).

³⁰ "For my eyes have seen Your salvation, ³¹ Which You have prepared **in the presence of all peoples**, ³² A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, And the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:30-32).

God is fulfilling His word to be the Savior of the nations. We cannot fail to see the persistent contrasts presented by Matthew's record. The magi bow before this small child whose humble surroundings would suggest otherwise.

II. The anxiety of King Herod (v. 3).

Who is this "King Herod"? "He was described as "a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis." It is difficult for us to imagine one who would kill his wives, children, and family members. Yet this is Herod's legacy. When King Herod heard of the new King's birth he was "thrown into confusion." His fear gripped him. It held him in bondage. This is what now dominated his thinking.

Notice the words used to describe him "troubled" (v. 3), "destroy" (v. 13), and "very enraged" (v. 16-18). "Those familiar with the story of Herod the Great in Josephus can well understand the meaning of these words."¹⁶

"The wise men from the East arrived inquiring of the one who *was born* "King of the Jews." The use of this title was personally significant given that in 40 B.C. the Roman Senate had declared *Herod* "King of the Jews." Thus, when he heard that there was a child born with the same title, it troubled him. We might question why the birth of Jesus was a threat to Herod. Named governor of Galilee at the age of 25, Herod was chief administrator of the entire northern section of the country. Despite his power and material wealth, King Herod continuously feared that his status was in jeopardy. An ominous distrust of anyone who might aspire to take his throne led him to execute one of his ten wives, drown his brother-in-law and mother, and take the lives of three of his fourteen children. Unlike Herod, who murdered and fought for the title, this child whom the Wise Men sought would assume his status from birth, a birth that would usher in freedom and unity, a new way of being in the world."¹⁷

"It was *in the days of Herod the king*. This Herod was an Edomite, made king of Judea by Augustus and Antonius, the then chief rulers of the Roman state, a man made up of falsehood and cruelty; yet he was complimented with the title of *Herod the Great*. Christ was born in the 35th year of his reign, and notice is taken of this, to show that the *sceptre* had now *departed from Judah*, and the *lawgiver* from between his feet; and therefore now was the time for Shiloh to come, and to him shall the gathering of the people be: witness these wise men, Gen. xlix. 10."¹⁸

Herod knew the promises and pictures. His instability equally caused the citizens of Jerusalem to tremble with fear. He fully recognized that the King who was to come would not share His reign with any other (Remember Zechariah 14:9)?

There are two thoughts about Herod from this text.

A. Herod knew the Scripture

“And at least we can give credit where it's due; Herod knew a genuine threat to his power when he saw it. Matthew contrasts two rival kings who rule not only over one people (the Jews) but over all the world. One king must give way. The subplot of King Herod almost overshadows the main plot of the adoration of the *magi*.”¹⁹

I do not doubt for one minute that the devil and his minions are fully aware of the conflict that began in the Garden and continues to this day.

B. Herod hated God

Herod's deception is staggering. His intent was to destroy the seed of the woman.

“The bloody project and design of Herod, occasioned by this enquiry, v. 7, 8. Herod was now an old man, and had reigned thirty-five years; this king was but newly born, and not likely to enterprise any thing considerable for many years; yet Herod is jealous of him. Crowned heads cannot endure to think of successors, much less of rivals; and therefore nothing less than the blood of this infant king will satisfy him; and he will not give himself liberty to think that, if this new-born child should be indeed the Messiah, in opposing him, or making any attempts upon him, he would *be found fighting against God*, than which nothing is more vain, nothing more dangerous. Passion has got the mastery of reason and conscience. **Herod was now about seventy years old, so that an infant, at this time under two years old, was not likely ever to give him any disturbance.**”²⁰

What vile exists within the man to destroy all male children under two years of age. How violated must be the conscience of such an individual. He is a contemptible man who kills to satisfy his place in time.

Herod is a part of the serpent's seed that will bruise the heel of the woman's seed. All of this is imagining the greater conflict that will transpire on Calvary's Mount.

“It was but seven miles from Jerusalem; how easily might he have sent spies to watch the wise men, who might have been as soon there to destroy the child as they to worship him! It is very strange that they went alone; that not one person of the court, church, or city, should accompany them, if not in conscience, yet in civility to them, or touched with a curiosity to see this young prince.”²¹

Herod's intent was to destroy the women's seed. His intent was to thwart the Storyline written and rendered certain by God. Could the outcome be doubted? Notice the outworking of Satan's wrath.

Notice the similarity between the birth of Moses and that of the Christ (Exod. 1:16, 17).

¹⁶ "and he said, "When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live." ¹⁷ But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live" (Exod. 1:16, 17).

God will win the victory over the onslaught of the serpent's seed against Him. Friend, if I am reading the Story correctly, the serpent's seed still wages war against the seed of the woman.

In 2005 (the most recent year for which there is reliable data), approximately 1.21 million abortions took place in the U.S., down from an estimated 1.29 million in 2002, 1.31 million in 2000 and 1.36 million in 1996. From 1973 through 2005, more than 45 million legal abortions have occurred in the U.S. ²²

Abortion is the serpent's seed raging against the women's seed.

III. The prophecy of Jeremiah (vv. 16-18).

Jeremiah spoke of this deadly price. All of this is a shadow of something greater.

"Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was buried in the neighborhood of Bethlehem (Ge 35:19), where her sepulcher is still shown. She is figuratively represented as rising from the tomb and uttering a double lament for the loss of her children—first, by a bitter captivity, and now by a bloody death."²³

"It is probable that the blessed Jesus was at this time not a year old; yet Herod took in all the infants *under two years old*, that he might be sure not to miss of his prey. He cares not how many heads fall, which he allows to be innocent, provided that escape not which he supposes to be guilty. 2. As to place; He kills all the male children, not only *in Bethlehem*, but *in all the coasts thereof*, in all the villages of that city."²⁴

Macrobius (Sat. II. iv. II) notes that Augustus said that it was better to be Herod's sow (hus) than his son (huios), for the sow had a better chance of life. I will note in a later study, but the serpent's seed still wages war against the woman's seed in the crimes against God of abortion and infanticide.

IV. The certainty of the promises (vv. 3-6, 15, 17).

"That prediction was accomplished in Jeremiah's time, when Nebuzaradan, after he had destroyed Jerusalem, brought all his prisoners to Ramah (Jer. xl. 1), and there disposed of them as he pleased, for the sword, or for captivity. Then was the cry *in Ramah heard* to Bethlehem (for those two cities, the one in Judah's lot, and the other in Benjamin's, were not far asunder); but now the prophecy is again fulfilled in the great sorrow that was for the death of these infants."²⁵

All the religious and political rulers knew the prophecies and those whose desires lay outside that of God's were determined to set themselves against Him. Friend, all that God promises will come to pass. Nothing we do can stop God from fulfilling His word, but oh how tragic is the outcome for those who set themselves against God. Our text calls us to remember and retell the one Story of God. May we awaken to God's triumph and the serpent's demise.

Shepherding the Sheep: (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. Let us not forget the tale of two seeds and the two kingdoms in conflict.
2. This world under Satan's management, our flesh and the devil himself are in direct opposition to all that is God. Let us not forget this fundamental thought.
3. Do you know God, if not then you are still of Satan's seed.
4. It is possible to leave the lineage leading to death and enter into the narrow gate leading to life. All you must do is receive Him, and then you will become one of His sons.
5. Never think that God is not working good from your loss. God used the Babylonian captivity to bring the "good news of great joy" to their captors.
6. God is fulfilling His promise to bring worshippers from every tongue, tribe, people and nation. He will make worshippers out of those we consider to be our enemies and deserving of death and damnation.
7. How might we speak to the issue of abortion and infanticide as a community of faith?

¹ A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures on Matthew 2:1.

² <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20071231JJ.shtml>

³ <http://www.bcponline.org/>

⁴ A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures on John 1:10.

⁵ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/january-6-2010.html>

⁶ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2

⁷ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.i.iii.html>

⁸ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20071231JJ.shtml>

⁹ John Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus*.

¹⁰ *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*.

¹¹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.i.iii.html>

¹² <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.i.iii.html>

¹³ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2

¹⁴ <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/zepifl.shtml>

¹⁵ <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/january-6-2010.html>

¹⁶ A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures on Matthew 2:3.

¹⁷ <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=63>

¹⁸ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2

¹⁹ <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20071231JJ.shtml>

²⁰ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2

²¹ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2

²² The Alan Guttmacher Institute [AGI].

²³ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.i.iii.html>

²⁴ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2

²⁵ Matthew Henry's Commentary on Matthew 2