

Title: Herod, Chief Priest, Scribes, and Magi

Text: Matthew 2:1-18

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Immanuel Baptist Church

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How many of you actually read the sermon titles? Not too many. How many of you listen to the sermon? I struggled with this title. Other than the holy family these are the key players in this I ended up listing the key characters that play a role in this intriguing story. Herod represents imperial power that is oppressive and anti-life. His paranoid worldview deems all that is sacred the enemy.

He loves power and is obsessed with keeping it; he sees imminent threat around every corner and behind every bush. The only holy thing for Herod is his kingship; his capacity to control and manipulate the lives of others. It's no wonder that when Herod was troubled, all Jerusalem was troubled with him.

The Christ born to Mary and Joseph will, when he begins his public ministry, proclaim and embody a kingdom of an altogether different kind than of Herod. When Jesus begins announcing the good news of God's new world—God's vision for the world—healing diseases, restoring the disabled, giving sight to the blind, eating with sinners, forgiving all manner of sin, teaching love and non-violence, Jesus provides a glimpse of what God's new world looks like. And it's just the opposite of the domination systems of the world that rule with an iron fist and oppress their people. Jesus helps us to envision a different world, a world reconciled and renewed and made whole, filled with compassion and equity and abundance for all people. This sort of world threatens the greed and oppressive use of power by the powers-that-be.

The magi come to Herod inquiring about the "one who has been born king of the Jews." This was Herod's title and Herod, being Herod, will not tolerate any rivals. He deceives the magi and pretends to want to pay homage to the Christ child himself. He gathers together some of the chief priests and teachers of the law and inquires about the birthplace of their Messiah. Without hesitating to consider Herod's motives they quote from the prophet Micah and direct him to Bethlehem. This may have been an inadvertent mistake on the part of these Jewish religious leaders, just as the Magi inadvertently went to Herod with their inquiry. But as Matthew's story unfolds, the religious leaders will become more and more intentional in their collaboration with the powers-that-be in—as they seek to get rid of Jesus. This, of course, all climaxes with Pilate, representing the imperial might of Rome, handing Jesus over to the soldiers to be crucified. Behind Pilate's decision, however, is the influence of the Jewish leaders who are able to apply enough pressure to force Pilate's hand. Pilate tries to wash his hands of the guilt, but he is the only one who

had the power to order the execution. Rarely does good come when religion joins hands with the powers-that-be.

Dr. Charles Marsh, is Professor of Religion at the University of Virginia. He is also the son of a former Southern Baptist Pastor and an evangelical Christian. He is also something of a prophet. His most recent book is entitled, *Wayward Christian Soldiers: Freeing the Gospel from Political Captivity*. He was recently interviewed in *Baptists Today* by Editor John Pierce. After reading the interview I purchased the book.

In one chapter he talks about setting aside a few days to reread the war sermons delivered by influential evangelical ministers during the lead up to the Iraq war. He comments that the fall of 2002 through the spring of 2003, will long be remembered as a sad chapter in the history of the Christian church. During those months, many of the most respected voices in American evangelicalism blessed the president's war plans. Dr. Marsh comments that in the sermons preached Jesus made only an occasional appearance.

Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, claimed that our military forces in Iraq were preparing the way for the conversion of the Muslim world. Can you imagine? Jack Graham (no relation to Billy Graham), the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said at the conclusion of his enthusiastic defense of the invasion of Iraq, that "in these urgent days we will seize the opportunity to advance the Kingdom of God." James D. Kennedy, minister of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and president of Coral Ridge Ministries, not only endorsed the invasion, but extended the call for America "to exercise godly dominion and influence over every aspect and institution of human society." He boldly declared, "no power on earth can stop us."

This is not the Spirit of Christ; this is not the Jesus of the Gospels. Whenever we enter war, for whatever reason, we ought to do so not enthusiastically, but with anguish in our hearts, because war means death and devastation. Military men and women will be killed, and what is called "collateral damage" involves intense and immense human suffering. The results of war are inevitable: Families are decimated, children die, homes are destroyed, and poverty, disease, and refugees follow in the wake of the devastation. That is the nature of war. How does this prepare the way for the kingdom of God?

According to the research of Dr. Marsh no one led the charge with greater fervor than Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church, Atlanta, whose weekly sermons are viewed by millions of television viewers. In calling for support of the war he said, "God battles with people who oppose him, who fight against him and his followers." With a swat of the hand he dismissed the whole teaching and life of Jesus, saying that Jesus was speaking to individuals when he said to love our enemies and turn the other cheek. And that was that. With one brief comment Jesus became totally irrelevant. Marsh says this about Stanley's war sermon, "The sermon's tone of supreme self-confidence is horrifying.

There is no anguish, no dark night of struggle, no wrestling with Scripture . . . not a hint of apprehension, or words of caution, about the certain violence inflicted on civilians. There is no sense in which the believer must evaluate all moral decisions on the basis of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ . . .” In evaluating their sermons Marsh says: Jesus’ authority to speak to our moral decisions was dismissed entirely and the teachings of Jesus were simply seen as irrelevant by believers struggling to counter the forces of terrorism.

There were other voices that railed against the decision to go to war; Jim Wallis, of Sojourners being one. But these voices were drowned out by the prominent evangelicals who received most of the media attention.

This is why it is dangerous to wrap the cross of Jesus Christ in the flag of any nation or imperial power. The cross of Jesus Christ is the symbol of an alternative world, of a world reconciled and at peace, a world made whole through love. The vision of God’s will for the world is lost when religion joins hands with political power. Religion loses its capacity to be prophetic.

Let’s turn to the Magi. These “Magi from the East” are wise men, sages, astrologers, interpreters of signs, not kings. We don’t know their religion, but they are not Jewish in faith. They see a sign in the heavens that points them to Bethlehem and the birth of one who is destined to be “King of the Jews.” Whatever their religion they recognize that the truth is not limited to their own religious system. They follow the star and the Jewish Scriptures to Bethlehem where pay homage to the Christ child bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Listen to these perceptive words by Bruce Sanguin, minister of Canadian Memorial Church and Centre for Peace in Vancouver, British Columbia. He writes:

“Here we have wise people scouring the night skies, not for signs that they have the Truth, but for signs of the truth wherever truth might choose to show itself. They have the wisdom to realize that the Holy One is not restricted to revealing Herself to only their people. They’ve taken their heads out of their own Bibles long enough to gaze up and out at what is the source of our own fundamental unity, rather than what divides us . . . they go to Israel for a single purpose, to pay homage. They have no intent, or need apparently, to import their religious beliefs. . . . What would ecumenical relations with other faiths look like if they were homage based? What would it mean for Christians to make the long journey across the strange cultural and religious landscapes bearing only gifts of respect for all that is sacred in other traditions?”

If we adopted this model would this lead us away from the revelation we claim in Jesus Christ? I don’t think so. Sanguin writes: “The Magi were steeped deeply enough in their own tradition that they could make a pilgrimage into another culture and religion. They enjoyed the security of their own faith system sufficiently that they could pay homage to

another . . . I believe that the deeper we go into our own faith system, the closer we get to God, the more we are informed by values of diversity, inclusivity, and respect for the inherent dignity of other people and faith.”

I have found that to be true in my own experience. In the last several years I have dug deep into our Christian faith tradition, especially the Gospels, and the deeper I go the more open, inclusive, and understanding I have become toward other faith traditions.

What would it mean for us to Christian missionaries into other cultures ready to receive as much as they give, to meet people of other faith traditions as mutual friends and pilgrims on a journey whom they can learn from, without feeling the need to convert them to their own system of belief.

In Matthew 25 we have a parable of judgment that is telling. The criterion for judgment has nothing to do with confessing Christ or believing in Christ, but it has everything to do with how one treats Christ. Those who stand before the judgment bar do not even know Christ and they are unaware of the implications of their actions. Jesus, who is the judge, says to those who are just and good: “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me?” They are perplexed, because they can’t recall ever showing such kindness to Jesus. They didn’t even know Jesus. But Jesus says, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Will Campbell is a farmer, writer, preacher at-large, and advocate of social justice. In the 1950’s and 60’s he was among the most conspicuous white southerners engaged in the civil rights movement. These days he says he is a missionary to “rednecks.” He is also a prophet. In one sermon he preached he critiqued the “the invitation” given in most Baptist churches.

Will said: I hope that someday there will be an evangelistic service in which, when the preacher gives the invitation and people start coming down the aisle, he yells back at them, “Don’t come down the aisle! Go to Jesus! Don’t come to me! Go to Jesus.” Then, the people who are coming down the aisle will turn around, exit the church, get in their cars and drive away. He then yells at the rest of the congregation, “Why are you hanging around here? Why don’t you go to Jesus too? Why don’t you all go to Jesus? Then the people all leave and soon the parking lot is empty

What I imagine, says Campbell, is that about a half hour later the telephone at the police station starts ringing off the hook, and the voice at the other end says, “We’re down here at the old-folks home and there’s some crazy people at the door yelling that they want to come in and visit Jesus, and I keep telling them that Jesus isn’t here! All we have here is a

bunch of old ladies who are half dead. But they keep saying, “But we want to visit Jesus! We want to visit Jesus!”

The next call is from the warden down at the prison. He’s saying, “Send some cops down here! There’s a bunch of nuts at the gate and they’re yelling and screaming. “Let us in there! We want to visit Jesus! We want to visit Jesus!” I keep telling them that all we have in this place are murderers, rapists, and thieves. But they keep yelling, “Let us in! We want to visit Jesus!”

No sooner does the cop at the desk hang up the phone than it rings again. This time it’s the superintendent of the state hospital calling for help. He’s complaining that there are a bunch of weird people outside begging to be let in. They, too, want to see Jesus. The superintendent says, “I keep telling them Jesus isn’t here. All we have here are a bunch of nuts, but they keep yelling at us, ‘We want to see Jesus.’”

The Magi came to visit Jesus and they brought gifts. The greatest gift we can give Jesus is our selves. Will we stand with Jesus on issues of justice when it’s not politically correct, when it’s not popular to do so, when our friends and family are telling us to sit down and shut up? Will we leave our comfort and affluence and go to where Jesus is and serve those that society calls “the least” of our brothers and sisters? There not “the least” in God’s eyes, because that’s where we find Jesus. That’s where Jesus is.

Gracious God, take the blinders off our eyes so we can see what Jesus sees and so we can stand with Jesus and not against him and so we can go to where Jesus is and serve him. Amen.