

A Clear and Present Danger

January 5, 2002 – 2nd Sunday after Christmas
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Matthew 2:1-12(NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “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.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Endings and Beginnings

Today’s scripture is the traditional church reading for January 6, the day in the church calendar called the Epiphany of the Lord. Epiphany, from a Greek word meaning manifestation or appearance, commemorates the arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem and marks the revealing of Jesus to all the world – Jew and Gentile alike. Matthew’s story of the wise men brings to an end the Christmas season. As with the birth stories, there is much here that we need to read with fresh eyes, as if we’d not read these words before. In this brief story, we see not only the worship that is rightly claimed by the Son of God, but we also see the path that lies before him. From his birth, Jesus posed a clear and present danger to the powers of the earth and those opposed to the way of God.

Who were these “wise men?”

“Wise men” in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians! But these men were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three! Because they came from the east, probably Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events. Over the centuries, there

The Gospel of Matthew

Matthew’s Gospel, written around 70AD or so, is the most Jewish of the four gospels. This Gospel is placed appropriately in our Bibles, because it serves to bridge the Old and New Testaments. Matthew writes in order to convince skeptical Jews that Jesus was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, despite his having been crucified on a Roman Cross. He wants his fellow Jews to see that God has at last, through Jesus, kept his covenant with his people.

Thus, given Jewish fascination with genealogies, Matthew opens his Gospel with Jesus’ genealogy, tracing his legal heritage through Joseph, thereby laying Jesus’ claim to David’s throne. Similarly, more so than the other Gospels, Matthew emphasizes Jesus’ fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies. Jesus’ virgin birth is the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. His birth in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of Micah 5:2. Herod’s killing of the infants in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15.

has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Whatever it actually was, these magi saw in the “star” a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born! – and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

There was no room in the inn . . . and now . . . there is room for only one king!

Some time after Jesus was born, the magi arrive in Jerusalem,¹ asking about this new king. King Herod hears about this and is frightened – after all, he is already King of the Jews, at least in the eyes of the Romans. Herod, and the rest of Jerusalem, know full well what is going on. A challenger to Herod’s claims to the throne has been born and the challenger’s birth in Bethlehem lends immediate credibility to his claims. Herod responds as we might expect. He hatches a plan to eliminate the challenger. He first finds out when this child was born and then sends the wise men to find the child using the pretext that Herod would like to honor the child. The “wise” men seem pretty naïve don’t they!

Upon their arrival in Bethlehem, the magi are filled with joy, for they realize that they have found what they were looking for – the true king. They then proceed to do what we all must do when faced with the reality of Jesus; they fall on their knees in homage, offering the finest gifts that they could imagine. They are warned in a dream to avoid Herod and so they head home. In the verses that follow, we learn that Herod is enraged by the premature departure of the magi and orders the death of all infants younger than two years old in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Herod is determined to eliminate the threat, but an angel has warned Joseph who has fled to Egypt with his young family.

What is Matthew telling us in this story?

The key theme in this story is the contrasting responses of the magi, Herod, and the Jewish leaders. The magi are not remotely Jewish, yet they are the ones who come seeking the Jewish Messiah! The magi

Who was Herod?

The New Testament Herods can be confusing because there are two of them by name and a third called Philip! (see Luke 3:1)

The Herod at the time of Jesus’ birth was Herod the Great, the founder of the family dynasty. In the struggle for control of Judea, Herod had backed the right horse – the Romans. As a reward, the Romans gave Herod the title of King, even though Rome’s power was wielded through a governor (e.g. Pontius Pilate). For the Jews, Herod was a pretender to the throne. Despite his massive rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, Herod the Great was never able to earn the affection of the Jews. They still awaited a true king, anointed by God and from the House of David.

When Herod the Great died in 4BC or so, soon after Jesus’ birth, his sons assumed control of various portions of Herod’s “kingdom.” All three were petty rulers, dependent on Rome’s power. One of these sons, Herod Antipas, “governed” Galilee and is the Herod who executed John the Baptist and played a key role in Jesus’ trial.

worshipfully accept Jesus and shower the infant with gifts. In contrast, the Jewish leaders, who know the prophecies, have ignored the child and go along with Herod’s plot. For his part, Herod is thrown into murderous fear and jealousy. So desperate is this old man to hang on to his power that he resorts to mass child murder! In this brief story, Matthew introduces us to the larger themes of his gospel – Jesus’ rejection by the Jewish leadership and his acceptance by Gentiles.

The Christ child posed a clear and present danger to Herod and, in important ways, he threatens us too. Jesus threatens our tendency to put our interests ahead of the interest of others. Jesus endangers our comfort with a world that has little room or time for God. Jesus challenges us to live as God’s people, seeking God’s will, not our own.

Next Week

Our lives are defined by the choices we make. Next week, we begin a four week series devoted to helping us make better choices – in our personal lives, in our work life, and in our spiritual lives.

¹ In all likelihood, the magi did not arrive a few days after Jesus’ birth, though that is how we usually depict the story in our Christmas pageants. They probably arrived six to eighteen months after Jesus’ birth, thereby explaining why Herod ordered the murder of all children two and younger.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 2:13-23 Herod the Great carries out his plot.</p>	<p>Day 2 Hosea 11:1-11 Israel as God's child. In v. 1, "son" is Moses. Matthew quotes this passage in 2:15 as a prophecy of Jesus. Matthew's gospel often compares Jesus to Moses.</p>
<p>Day 3 Exodus 1:8-22 More than a millennium earlier, an Egyptian Pharaoh carried out a scheme similar to Herod's.</p>	<p>Day 4 Jeremiah 31:15 The lament of the exiles is heard. (quoted by Matt at 2:18)</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 23:1-16 Jesus appears before Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Don't Forget!! Bible Academy Begins January 13!! Sign Up Now!!

We hope you will sign up for one of our classes. Classes are offered Mon-Thur evenings and two mornings! There are classes on the Old and New Testament, Jesus, John Wesley, John's Gospel, the Apostles' Creed, and the Kings of Israel. Wow!!

There is something for you! Please join us!

To sign up, pick up a registration form in the gathering room or register on-line at www.standrewumc.org or www.standrewccl.org!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The main point of Matthew's story is to show the world's response to Jesus' birth. The people who should have best seen the truth, the priests and scribes, did not. They recognized none of the signs that Matthew is so careful to point out. What do you think Jesus' second coming will be like? How likely are we to be mistaken about the features of Jesus' second coming? What can we do to prepare for his coming?
2. Jesus and Herod had very different ideas about the nature and use of power. Make a Top Ten List of the contrasts in these two men. What does this list reveal about how we might be contrasted with Jesus? Discuss this quote from D.A. Hare's commentary on Matthew: "For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our King and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!"
3. There is nothing spectacular in the magi's worship of the infant Jesus. With great joy, they simply fall on their knees and present their gifts. Re-read verses 11-12. What can the magi's worship of Jesus teach us about our own worship?