

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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What Kind of News Is This?

Matthew 2:1-12

Good news of great joy. That's how the angel summarized the announcement to the shepherds. God has come to save his people. The Messiah has arrived. The Lord is here to set things right. How could that not be good news? For an answer to that question, exit from Luke's version of the Christmas story and go back to Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth. In other words, go from the sheep pasture to the shiny palace. That's where Herod has assembled his religious advisors, seeking their input on how to respond to a band of really strange non-Jews who have shown up claiming that there's a new king in power.

Remember that these pagan astrologers arrived uninvited and unannounced. What's more, they certainly didn't fit in. They look different from most of the people in Jerusalem. Their skin color is different. They dress differently. They speak with a different accent. On the one hand, it's great that these outsiders care so much about finding and meeting the ruler of the Jews. But on the other hand, when asked how they made it hundreds of miles to the Jewish capital, they said, "Oh, we followed a star." Okay, this is kind of weird. In fact, there's something bizarre about this whole situation. A caravan of foreigners with a completely different worldview, who look for life's meaning by staring at the skies, shows up at the castle door saying they now want to worship Israel's God. Now I ask you, who saw that coming?

Actually, the Scriptures did. In the portion of the Bible we call the Old Testament, there are plenty of places where God reminds us that his saving purposes are worldwide. Just restoring his people Israel isn't enough. Blessing his people is simply part of his larger strategy to bless all people, to make his glory known among all nations. He aims to display his saving power to the ends of the earth, and people from everywhere will come to offer praise and thanksgiving, including star watchers who suddenly show up at the king's palace, looking for help with directions.

But didn't King Herod, or at least his team of Bible experts, know these Scriptures? Well, yes and no. They knew them, in the sense that they had mastered the content. But they didn't know how to apply them when the time came for God to arrive. In this case, it took a group of pagan outsiders to disturb and disrupt the religious insiders, so they could recognize what God was doing.

Good news of great joy? No, not to everyone. Matthew says that when Herod heard the magi's report about a new king, "he was greatly disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3). The word translated as "disturbed" could also mean "troubled." Herod is troubled by the news that he has a rival. Actually, more than a rival, a superior. Not that Herod isn't used to dealing with superiors. After all, he has been ruling territory that's part of a larger empire, so he's beholden to the Romans. But even so, he seems to have had plenty of latitude in exercising his own authority over God's people. In fact, history indicates that he did so with great paranoia, using whatever force and brutality was necessary to hold on to power, even to the point of eliminating some members of his own family. And now, it's

Jesus who needs to be eliminated. So Herod decides that he will manipulate these traveling magi, these Gentiles in the extreme, and use them to lead him to this "king of the Jews."

What Herod doesn't realize is that this child he intends to wipe off the face of the earth is actually the ruler of the whole earth, and not just the king of Judea. That's why the magi showed up in the first place, because God's kingship is making an incursion into Herod's kingship, and into all human kingship, in order to accomplish what only God can accomplish. As preacher Thomas Long has put it, ". . . the gospel is the good news that if there is to be justice in the world, there can be only one true King. If there is peace in the world, there can only be one true Ruler. If there is to be mercy, there can be only one true Lord . . . and his name is not Herod."¹

Long goes on to describe a beautiful eighteenth century nativity scene at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. All the usual characters are there: Joseph, Mary, baby Jesus, angels, shepherds, and wise men. But there's also something surprising about this scene, something easily missed by the casual observer. What's strange is that the stable, the shepherds, and the cradle are set, not in the small town of Bethlehem, but among the ruins of mighty Roman columns. The fragile manger is surrounded by broken and decaying columns. As Long puts it, "The artists knew the meaning of the treasure: The gospel, the birth of God's new age, was also the death of the old world."²

It's no wonder that Herod "was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." What a contrast to the shepherds in Luke's version of Jesus' birth. To people like them, who were at the bottom of society's ladder, the arrival of God's reign was good news. Rather than going to Bethlehem to kill Jesus, they went to help coronate him. But to Herod, and those who occupied society's places of privilege and power, the announcement of a Savior came across as bad news. Jesus wasn't to be received. He was to be resisted. He was to be rejected. He was to be removed.

There's not room for two kings in this realm. That's a pretty good summary of Herod's reaction to the arrival of God's reign. Of course it's easy for us to point our fingers at Herod, along with all his religious experts, and chastise them for not recognizing what was going on. They knew the Bible from cover to cover, and yet didn't understand that their only true hope was just five or six miles down the road in Bethlehem. Instead, it took a band of outsiders, who didn't even have the Scriptures, who had traveled several months and hundreds of miles, to show up and notify the religious insiders that God was on the move to set things right in the world.

So let's be cautious and careful about condemning the attitudes and actions of Herod and all those who tried to push back against the incursion of God's kingship. In many ways, we're right there with them, resisting the sovereignty of God over our lives, in their entirety. We may not be out to eliminate Jesus, but we still have a mighty hard time yielding more and more of the territory of our lives to his dominion and authority. After all, our will often collides with his will. He tells us to give up things that we don't want to surrender. He commands us to do things that run directly against the grain of our desires and instincts. He calls us to follow him into places and circumstances where we would rather not go. He leads us down the path of costly commitment, not the route of comfortable convenience. In short, he teaches us that there is no way to be his disciples without acknowledging his right to direct our lives, in every way.

It's hard for us to do that. We all have some of Herod in us. "Not that you're out to kill Christ," says preacher Mark Buchanan, "but you can't both sit on the throne and have Jesus there as well. You can't both rule over your life and have Jesus ruling over it as well. You

can't be the possessor of your possessions and have Jesus as the possessor of them, too. It's one or the other, not both. In our hearts we often set up Jesus as a rival of our kingdom. We say, 'You can rule as long as it's okay with me and you don't encroach upon areas that I've decided are my domain.'"³

But by your presence here in worship today, you're acknowledging that it's all Christ's domain. Your time. Your talents. Your money. Your possessions. Your education. Your occupation. Your marriage. Your family. Your home. Your politics. Your sex life. Your online life. Your plans. Your purposes. Your resolutions. In all these areas of your life, and every other one you can think of, there can be only one true ruler. May it be Christ the Lord.

On this first Sunday of a new year, you've followed in the steps of the magi, looking for Christ, so that you may worship him. Whatever you receive from him in this gathering, be it strength, hope, comfort, conviction, guidance, instruction, inspiration, and so on, may your experience here today be primarily about what you present to Christ, most of all, a life surrendered to his sovereignty and given to him for his glory.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima: CSS, 1987) 32.

² Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, 32.

³ Mark Buchanan, "The Wise Men Cry Glory." A sermon at PreachingToday.com. Accessed December 30, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2009/december/thewisemencryglory.html?paging=off>>.