

January 5, 2020

“The Trouble With Christmas: Troubled Royalty”

Matthew 2:1-18

Some have hypothesized that the ‘star’ which appeared to the wisemen/Magi wasn’t a star at all but the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. For many ancient astrologers (more scientifically/astronomy-based than today’s astrology), Jupiter was known as the ‘royal’/kingly planet and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews. What the Magi concluded was clear: “We must go and inquire among the Jews about the birth of a king.” So who should they ask? How about the one currently in power? King Herod. Protocol would have dictated it.

But King Herod was driven by fear, not faith. And it turns out fearful leaders – any of us who lead and give in to fear – make bad decisions. It is a matter of record that King Herod wasn’t just “**troubled**/frightened/disturbed/terrified;” he was a maniac. And what he did with the information gathered from the religious experts – once the Magi didn’t return – was one of the saddest, most horrible moments in our scriptures. A troubled king causes the deepest pain imaginable – for mothers and fathers, and all the citizens in and around Bethlehem.

I’ve shared this before (and maybe you’ve previously heard or read about Herod), but for those who really knew King Herod they weren’t shocked at all. He was just the type of sham ‘religious leader’ Rome could endorse and protect. Herod was committed to perpetuating Caesar’s shadow mission while getting perks in return. He was a tyrant, murderer, and madman; he killed two brothers-in-law, his own wife, and two of his own sons. Shortly before his death he ordered the arrest of numerous people and decreed that they be executed on the day of his death, in order to guarantee everyone in the country would be appropriately sad. (from Philip Yancey’s *The Jesus I Never Knew* and Tim Keller’s *Hidden Christmas*)

As I was preparing this message, I felt like I should address what troubles so many of us about this troubling story; and not just this story but all senseless acts of violence that take innocent lives. We’re all troubled by the actions of this troubled king, aren’t we? In fact, one of the things (if not the primary thing) which makes it hard for people to believe in the God who came to us in Jesus is this often unanswered question: “How could a good God allow such terrible things?” Ever asked this question?

I don’t think God needs a defense attorney but I do want to help us think about the nature of love, and the risks involved in terms of the freedom that love requires. Love is a multi-faceted mystery in so many ways. And, yet, we can identify many of those facets at some level.

One of them is freedom. If you love someone or someone loves you, there must also be a sense of freedom in the relationship. If there is no freedom, then the relationship is built on something else: power, fear, neediness/dependency, or something else. Freedom must be present for love to exist. But if there is genuine freedom, then there is choice at some level; a choice to love in return, a choice to manipulate for selfish gain, a choice to power up, a choice to reject. Love is risky because you can't demand a certain response from the object of your love.

God LOVES us! That's what we declare at Christmas. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever [chooses to] believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) This love comes as a free gift, and that freedom goes all the way back to the garden. Inherent in love is a risky and troubling freedom.

So within God's ultimate rule and plan, Herod gets to make choices; and so do the Magi; and so do you and me.

We get to choose:

What we look at. It's probably not stargazing that informs our understanding of reality. But we can choose to look at various newsfeeds (or not), porn sites (or not). We can choose to look at people and try to determine what is true about them (or actually get to know them and listen to their story before we make judgments).

Where we travel. We get to choose who we follow or invite to journey with us; where we go with our thoughts; and where we travel in our relationships – including how far we want to go taking relational risks and becoming vulnerable.

Whether we want to worship Jesus or not. We were made to worship so we don't get to NOT worship. Everyone worships something or someone. We get to choose if that someone is Jesus.

What we give (or don't give). We can hold on to and hoard our resources and time and abilities, or live open-handedly.

We even get to choose if and how we want to respond to God's love. And each choice we make has an impact; some choices have greater impacts than others.

Freedom and God's sovereignty is a tricky thing to talk about and get our heads/hearts around. Somehow, until Christ comes again and the Kingdom of God is finally and fully restored, there will be decisions made – big and small, intentional and unintentional – that cause great pain; for us and for all Rachel's [Israel's] descendants.

But even with all the weeping and wailing in Ramah, God’s rescue mission for the whole world was underway – and it would not and will not be stopped. I know that wasn’t comforting to all these mothers and fathers and siblings who wailed in that horrible moment – and it may not be very comforting in this moment for those in the midst of loss and violence and hatred.

But we believe that God is sovereign, and even evil incarnate (Herod) cannot stop God from carrying out His plan of redemption. God providentially ensures the safety of His One and Only Son, who was sent to make a way for everyone – young and old, benevolent and violent. Joseph gets Jesus and Mary safely to Egypt until it’s safe to return. And this One and Only Son would go on to accomplish the one thing we can never do for ourselves: provide forgiveness, salvation, and an ever-lasting and un-rivaled Kingdom. As is predictable, many have been, are and will be threatened by His everlasting Kingdom and oppose Him – passively or, like Herod, aggressively. But the Good News of Christmas is that, in the end, God will have His way – with the world . . . and us . . . His Church. The “Herods” of the world aren’t our only problem.

We have a little bit of King Herod in us too, don’t we? None of us gets very excited about handing control and dominion over to someone else; about sharing power or giving it away; about being asked to get off our personal thrones to make way for another. Whether it’s a co-worker, sibling, or new member of our favorite volunteer-led organization . . . we don’t ‘go gently into that good night.’ We like our little kingdoms. Thank God for the loving, free gift of His Son, who came to save us from ourselves.

As we come to the Table this morning to celebrate the sacrifice of Christ – the One and Only King – we are reminded that though Jesus avoided death after His birth, He did not avoid the kings and rulers of Jerusalem and Rome three decades later. But this also was the sovereign plan of God: to rescue us from our sin . . . **NO MATTER THE COST!**

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the gifts brought to Jesus. But – more importantly – Jesus is God’s gift given to us. And nothing, including our choice to reject Him, can change that!