

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany + January 6, 2019

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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The King of the Jews

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 2:1-2: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The king of the Jews is troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

See, Herod's not really a king – he wasn't born of royal lineage to sit on the throne. He's purchased it from Rome. No, actually, he has leased it, and periodically he must travel to Rome to renew his right to the crown. What kind of a king is that?

He's not "of the Jews," either. By ancestry, he's Idumean: he's a descendant of Edom – of Esau, Isaac's other son. The Edomites have a long history of being enemies of the Israelites, of delighting in their destruction. Now he rules over them, and they're none too happy about it.

This king of the Jews, who is neither a king nor a Jew, has long since decided that he's got to look out for himself because nobody else will; and he has enough power to be ruthless about it. He lives by the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest; or to put it another way, if you're going to take care of yourself, it has to be at the expense of others. Herod has family who might want the throne instead, and so he kills off enough relatives that Caesar will remark that it would be safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. When he's dying, he will command that prominent citizens be locked up in every town across Judea, to be executed on the day of his death. Why? Because it's appropriate for a nation to mourn when the king dies; and knowing how much the people hate him, Herod says, "I know they will not mourn my death; but on that day, they will mourn."

You can imagine his fear and rage when these magi appear from the East and ask, "Where is He who is born King of the Jews?" How galling it must be to find out that he has a rival to the throne – and to find out from these foreigners instead of his own security! And to find out that his rival is *born* to be king! Herod knows what must be done. He must look out for himself, and that must be at the expense of this rival king.

He summons his own wise men, priests and scribes, to determine where the Christ might be found. From the prophet Micah, they learn of Bethlehem; so Herod sends the magi on their way, instructing them to find Him and send word back so that Herod too might come and worship Him. The magi depart, search and find Jesus. They offer Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh as prophesied. But they do not report to Herod: instead, warned in a dream, they return to their own country by a different way. Herod might think he's fooling others, but everybody knows that Herod isn't going to bow down to a toddler and worship Him as king. Everybody knows that Herod has calculated and come to this conclusion: if he is going to survive and hold onto his reign, the Christ has to die.

When the magi don't return, Herod proves true to himself: calculating when the Christ was born by when the star appeared, he commands that every male child, aged two and under, around Bethlehem be killed. He hopes to catch the Christ in his net, but Jesus escapes to Egypt.

There's a reason why nobody names their kid Herod. He's a cruel, brutal man. He is, by nature, evil.

With that, we ask this question: what is the difference between you and Herod? As uncomfortable as it is, the answer is not that your nature is different than his. You were born with the same original sin as he. What I mean is this: by nature, you want to take care of yourself. Since you're not God – since you're not all-powerful and eternal and can't make things out of nothing, you've got to take what you need from elsewhere. In other words, if you're going to take care of yourself, it has to be at the expense of others. That's what the sinful nature does.

You don't really even have to think through looking out for yourself, because it comes so naturally. You aim for the best piece of meat on the platter because who deserves it more than you? For your own gratification, you misuse the bodies of others with your eyes and mind, if not with your own body. You delight in gossip about others because you feel better about yourself when you distract yourself with their shame. You envy the successes of other people because their triumphs don't improve your lot; and because you suspect that as they take care of themselves, they are probably doing so at your expense. Threats to health and wellbeing spark fear and anger within you, because it's so hard to gain and so easy to lose.

St. James speaks of this when he says, "You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (Jas. 4:2-3).

But wait! Isn't that too harsh? After all, you don't *really* murder – you're not like Herod who slaughters family and foes alike to preserve himself, are you? Aren't you different?

There is a difference, but not perhaps what you want it to be. The difference is that Herod's nature is unrestrained: he has enough power and protection that he can do whatever it takes. In his position as "king of the Jews," he's mostly above the law. Your nature is more restrained – by the laws of God and man. In other words, your sinful nature says, "I want to take care of myself, but I can only do so much. Even though I want what belongs to my neighbor, stealing it means I'll probably end up arrested, and that wouldn't be good for me." God gives His law to curb, to restrain the sinful nature; if you are not beholden to the law, you'll go the route of Herod. You know this already: sins like lust, greed, covetousness, gossip and envy are all like drinking salt water: the more you do it, the more you need to do more if you're going to satisfy your passions. Feed the beast, and you only become more beastly. You'd slip and slide your way toward full beast mode if there were no law; as it is, you do what you can get away with.

What is the end of the beast? The end is the grave. The end is eternal death. See, if you've determined that you're going to take care of yourself, then God lets you have your wish. You're free to resist His calls to repentance and life; but if you do, then you have to save yourself from hell. You have to raise yourself from the dead. At the end, if you determine that you're going to save yourself and haven't realized until it's too late, then it will be the grave that teaches that you're a nothing.

That's the end of Herod, king of the Jews. Happily for you, he is not your king. The Christ, whom Herod fails to kill, is.

Safely delivered from Herod's murderous intent, Jesus grows up. He's baptized and reveals Himself to be who He always has been: the Christ, the holy and only-begotten Son of God. After three years of public ministry, he stands on trial before another ruler, Pontius Pilate. Where Herod comes across as evil, Pilate comes across as cowardly, but he reaches the same conclusion: if he is going to live, then the Christ has to die. So, thirty-some years after Herod failed, Pilate succeeds: Jesus is crucified.

When He dies, the sign above His head declares that the long-dead Herod's desire is fulfilled: Jesus is dying because He is the true King of the Jews.

And why has this King come? Why has He lived and why has He died? Marvel at the words you'll soon say in the Creed: He does this "for us and for our salvation." The Son of God has a human nature, but not a sinful nature. He has not come to look out for Himself: as God made flesh, He has come not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. Marvel at how great His love and how great His sacrifice: not only does He constantly put the needs and wellbeing of everybody else first, and not only does He do so without one sinful thought of envy, lust, pride, greed, covetousness or resentment; but He shoulders all those sins and iniquity – every pretense, every lie, everything. On the cross, He is looking out for everybody but Himself, and so He suffers God's wrath for the sins of the world. For you, for me, for all. On the cross, He becomes what we were destined to be in our sin: a nothing in the kingdom of God.

Three days later, He rises again. And what does the risen King do? He hands out the spoils of His victory! He delivers you from sin and death! He delivers you from you!

So He said at the font this morning, "Elizabeth Constance, I will not leave you condemned to the impossible task of saving yourself. I will not abandon you to your sinful nature to become a little beast. Today, I've drowned that old sinful nature in you, and I have raised you up in Me as a new creation. The old has passed away and the new has come. You're clothed in My righteousness, joined to Me. I died your death and I have given you My life. As I live forever, you will live also."

That was the Lord's promise to Elizabeth in baptism today, just as He made that promise to you by water and the Word when He drowned your old Adam and gave you eternal life. Be on your guard, though: gifts can be rejected, and life can be thrown away. Or, as others wittier than I have put it: in Baptism, Christ has drowned the old Adam, but that dude sure knows how to swim. Daily, those sins of lust and greed and covetousness return. Daily, you find yourself looking out for yourself once again, and doing so at the expense of others. It still feels natural to be beastly.

So daily you repent: that's not you anymore! You're baptized into Christ, clothed in His righteousness and set free from sin. You confess your sins and remain in Him, because in Him your eternal life is certain.

You're set free from sin! You're set free from ... you! You're set free in Christ! That's why you run to hear His Word, because you know that Christ the King still comes to serve you by forgiving your sins, by strengthening your faith, but renewing the life He has given you. You run to the altar because there He is again, His body and blood for you. Look at that! You come to worship Him, and He ends up making you so much richer! You come and you rightly offer gifts, and yet He gives you far more!

In other words, where is He who is born King of the Jews? He who went to the cross for you is as near as His Word and His sacraments, to give you grace and life and salvation, to say, "I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen