

Two Kings
Matthew 2:1-15
January 6 (Epiphany)

I. Man v. Baby

It seems like, only yesterday that we celebrated the birth of Jesus, that we sang “Glory to the newborn King.” It’s in Bethlehem that you get your first glance at the King of kings, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. His birth is certainly humble, but you know that Jesus is also the Son of God, become flesh to be the Messiah. His power and holiness are beyond comprehension, although for now all that power and holiness are cloaked in His infant body. But some know. Shepherds come to see Him the night of His birth, because angels tell them the Savior is born.

In our Gospel lesson for today, you meet another “king of the Jews:” Herod, also known as “Herod the Great.” Although he rules over Judea, he’s not Jewish: he’s Idumean, a descendant of Esau, not Jacob. He’s been in power for over 35 years, and he’s known to be astute, talented, utterly ruthless and tipping toward paranoia. He has crushed all opposition to his throne: by the end of his life, this will mean his murdering his brother-in-law (the high priest at the time!), his mother-in-law, his wife and three of his sons. When he nears death, he will be horrifically diseased; and knowing that his subjects despise him, he will command that leading citizens throughout Judea be imprisoned until he dies, then, on the day of his death, they are to be executed. Why? “Because”, he declares, “the Jews will not mourn me...but they will mourn.” So instead of rejoicing over Herod’s death, the Jews would be mourning the loss of their loved ones. (By the way, all this we know not from the Bible, but from the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus)

King Herod the Great will leave a legacy that includes some impressive monuments, perhaps most obviously, the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. But he’s an utterly selfish, cruel man who will do anything to hold onto his power.

In the first twelve verses of Matthew 2, Herod’s heard of a new threat. Wise men, or Magi, from the East have appeared before him and asked, “Where is He who is born King of the Jews?” The question, says Scripture, leaves Herod troubled: and when Herod is troubled, all Jerusalem is troubled with him. “Where is He who is born King of the Jews?” That hits hard: Herod wasn’t born king, but appointed by the Romans. He was not from the Royal family of King David. For Herod, that can mean only one thing: there’s a rival. And no matter who He might be, the rival must be eliminated.

Herod consults his advisors—and Scripture! He then sends the Wise Men out to look for the newborn King. He sends them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him” (Matthew 2:8). He’s lying, of course: he has no intention of bowing the knee. Herod only worships Herod. He just wants the Magi to do the legwork so he can send in the soldiers.

The Wise Men find Jesus. They bow the knee to the King of the Jews, giving Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then, being warned in a dream to go home without returning to Herod, they depart. That’s where our text begins.

The Lord warns Joseph in a dream: “Rise, take the Child and His mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the Child, to destroy Him.” Joseph doesn’t wait until morning, but hustles his family down to Egypt. They will spend several months there, until the death of Herod. Why? For safety, of course, but there’s another reason. Even as a baby, Jesus is fulfilling prophecy and establishing credentials: “This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called My Son.”

This is where we see Herod at his most cruel. He’s furious because the wise men are gone and the King of the Jews is still a baby out there somewhere. If he cannot kill that single boy, his solution is to kill all the boys. He gives the order, and all boys around Bethlehem, 2 years old or younger, are killed. The number of victims is estimated at twenty or so. They are the first martyrs of the New Testament, called the Innocents, by the way—not because they are sinless, but because they’ve done nothing deserving execution. They die simply because one of them might be Jesus, and that’s enough of a reason for Herod the Great. This also, as Matthew notes, fulfills prophecy as these children are no more. The quote from Jeremiah refers to Ramah, a small village between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was buried. In Jeremiah’s day, the prophet is referring to Rachel weeping because of the deportation of her children being carried into exile by the Babylonians. But Matthew sees the ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah’s words in Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem.

But one Child, the King of the Jews, lives on. That, in itself, is remarkable. Herod’s managed to kill the high priest and assorted royalty, but he can’t get to the child in the carpenter’s care. When Herod dies, Joseph returns with his family to “the land of Israel;” and since Herod’s son, the brutal Archelaus, is now enthroned in Jerusalem, he takes them all the way up north to Galilee, back to the less-than-illustrious town of Nazareth. Galilee isn’t quite the same real estate as Judea: the Jews around Jerusalem tend to look down their noses at the Galileans because, up there on the border, they come into contact with a lot more Gentiles. But there’s a reason why Jesus is to grow up there, says Matthew—so “that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled.”

That’s the Gospel lesson before us. It’s a curious account because, while the story is all about Jesus, He’s not doing anything. At least—He doesn’t seem to be. He’s the One being taken here and there. But the Lord tells us much about His plan for our salvation.

There are lessons here of Law and Gospel.

As our celebration of peace on earth and goodwill toward men is just renewed by Christmas, today we run into the train-wreck of Herod the Great as Exhibit A of sinful man. God gives power for the purpose of serving others, and He places rulers into positions of authority in order to care for the subjects He entrusts to their care. For all of his might, Herod is a slave to sin—and his enslavement is demonstrated in horrific acts. He doesn’t rule in service to others, but really only in service to himself. He’s made himself into his own god, which only shows how deeply deceived he is by sin.

Now, since Herod has made himself into his own god, he’s given **himself** the responsibility of achieving immortality and preserving his own life. As far as immortality goes, perhaps that’s the reason for his building projects like the temple, so that people will point long after he’s gone and say, “Herod the Great built that.” Yet such trophies built by men crumble: in the case of the temple, it will

be destroyed by the same Romans who gave Herod his power in the first place. As far as preserving life goes, sin always leads to death. In Herod's case, he preserves his own life by taking the lives of others. He is willing to sacrifice anyone to preserve himself, even three of his own sons. He is willing to command the deaths of innocent boys in Bethlehem to safeguard his own way of life. Herod knows that much and accepts it as the cost of doing business, but the evil is far beyond what he comprehends: when he goes after the boys of Bethlehem, he's trying to kill the Son of God. That's the ultimate goal of sin: get rid of life, get rid of God. And since it can do neither, it works to deliver you to an eternity of eternal death and God's absence.

In contrast to **that** king, there's the baby Jesus. According to His human nature, He has no might and power. He can't even walk yet, and His army and support staff are made up of Joseph and Mary. But He is still born the King of the Jews; and everything He does in this text is part of His work to save you.

You see this happening in the two prophecies that He fulfills in our Gospel lesson. The first is, "Out of Egypt I have called My Son." This is not the first trip of the people of God down to Egypt and back. Think back to Genesis, when a famine drove Jacob and his family down to Egypt for food—and where the Lord had arranged for Joseph to go before them so that they might be kept alive. The people of Israel remained there for 400 years—first as welcome guests, then as Pharaoh's slaves. But the Lord didn't forsake them: with Moses as His instrument, the Lord rescued them from Pharaoh and led them back through the wilderness to the Promised Land. You know what happened in the wilderness: the people constantly grumbled, growled and rebelled against God. It goes without saying that they didn't make the trip without sin. But Jesus does. As the Messiah, the Chosen One, He retraces the steps of God's chosen people down to Egypt and back—and He does it without sin. Remember: kings are given authority to serve those placed under their care. Jesus is sending a message that He has come to do what people can't do, and He's doing it for them. He's living a perfectly righteous life so that He can give them the credit for it. His flight to Egypt and back is part of His merciful reign, His service to the world.

The other prophecy He fulfills is "He shall be called a Nazarene." It's an odd prophecy in that we don't find it in any of the Old Testament books; but because the Word says it was so prophesied, we believe it to be true. It's also a bit cryptic in that the Scriptures tell us little about Nazareth, other than that it was not a great place to be: remember Nathanael's question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Jesus is prophesied to be a Nazarene, growing up in a humble town in the undesirable region of Galilee, undesirable because it's close to where all those vulgar Gentiles live. But this is a comfort, too. What sort of a Messiah would grow up in Nazareth, up near all those Gentiles? The answer is simple: a Messiah who has come to save both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus hasn't come to be the Savior of some, but the Savior of all, that whosoever believeth in Him may not perish, but have everlasting life. As a Nazarene, though, He'll always be looked down upon by the ruling classes of Jerusalem, the blue-bloods like the Pharisees and the Sadducees. What sort of Messiah would have the disapproval of such elites? Again, the answer is simple: a Messiah who has come to save by His own sacrifice on behalf of man, not the sacrifices of man offered up to God.

That's where this Baby is headed—to the cross as the Sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Behold the mercy of God. Herod "the Great," enslaved by sin, will sacrifice everyone to save his own life. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, will sacrifice His own life to die for the sins of all. He is at work to

save in Bethlehem, where a rough-cut manger and swaddling clothes might as well point us to the beams of the cross and the burial shroud. As a young child, the one born “King of the Jews” is untouchable by Herod’s wrath because it is not yet time for Jesus’ death. But when it is time, the Nazarene willingly gives up His life on the cross. And what is the sign above His head? “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Set in contrast to the evil of Herod the Great, these stories of Jesus in Matthew 2 tell you much about what He has come to do. He has come to defeat death and reverse the curse of sin. In fact, where Herod took the life of those Innocents in Bethlehem, who were made the people of God by circumcision and awaiting the Messiah, Jesus will restore life to them. Everlasting life.

Beware the sins of Herod, for the same sin enslaves the world and seeks to enslave you. The slavery of sin leads man to reject God, to turn to other gods instead; and above all, the greatest false god with which you will ever struggle will be the god of yourself. You will be tempted to make all sorts of sacrifices to this god, be it on the altar of convenience, or expediency, or desire, or rebellion, or anger, or whatever. The temptations will vary, but you will always be tempted to reject God and defy His Word in order to do what you want to do in order to please and preserve yourself. This is the plight of all sinners, enslaved to first serve themselves, then others, then God. How ugly can it get? Though far more clinical than Herod, our world is not far from his sins: millions of children are sacrificed, aborted, most often upon the altar of personal convenience and threat to lifestyle.

That may never be a temptation for you: God grant it to be so. But every sin that tempts you to please yourself is designed to lead you to worship yourself and reject God. You’ll be willing to sacrifice right and righteousness to get what **YOU** desire, often before you know it. Often without ever realizing you’ve done it.

But know too that you are baptized in the name of the Nazarene, who was not received even by His own people. A world that is far enough from God to approve the death of unborn children is not going to have much love for His Son, nor for His people. You may not get chased down to Egypt and back, but being a Christian does not mean a carefree or popular life. The more a society departs from God’s Word, the tougher it will be on His people there. We still have it very easy at present, which only means the temptations to compromise and reject the Lord will be that much more subtle and attractive...but just as deadly to faith.

But death is not for you. Life is. Remember what the angel said to the shepherds: unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Christ is born in Bethlehem to be your Savior, too. Even as a baby, He’s at work in our Gospel lesson to save you, and all of Herod’s wrath and soldiers can’t stop the less-than-one-year-old Messiah. In the coming Gospel lessons, you’ll hear Him live and speak and work to save you; and as Easter draws near, you’ll hear Him go to the cross and die to save you. The sin of Herod is always nearby, but Christ the King is as near to you as His Word and Sacraments. He is born to deliver from sin, death and devil—to deliver you with the Good News that you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen