

Take the Jerusalem Bypass Matthew 2:1-12—The Visit of the Magi

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“And they went back home by another way, a different way.”

The Magi are not the main characters in the drama of Matthew 2. No, the main characters are the two people in the text who have the same title, King of the Jews—Jesus, called the Christ, and Herod, called the Great. In Matthew’s gospel we quickly learn what to ask to find out who is the genuine one: who dies and who lies? The genuine King of the Jews never lies and himself dies for God’s people. The phony one regularly lies and makes others do the dying for him. That’s true in leadership and authority positions throughout the world. Who dies and who lies—that is the question.

Matthew 2 sets the stage for the rest of Matthew’s gospel. The Magi are the walk-ons to help us see the two really main characters. And when the two start out with the same title—and are living in the same place at the same time—you know there’s probably going to be trouble. When there’s only one mountain, there can only be one king of the mountain. Or that’s the way we think. That’s the way Herod thought. Jesus did not.

Herod the Great is on the front page of today’s Post-Dispatch. A headline refers to the October 1990 “Temple Mount” massacre in Jerusalem. Herod built that Temple Mount, a man-made platform, big as several football fields, for the temple he also built for the Jews—and all of this before Jesus was born. What Jews today call the “Wailing Wall” is a segment of the west face of that Herodian structure.

Of course, there’s a headline there too about George Bush and Saddam Hussein. Both of them sound Herodian, even though Bush is our President, a nice guy, and even a fellow Christian. Run the simple test question: who dies, who lies?

Yet today’s sermon is not about these two men, nor is it addressed to them, since they are not here in the congregation. Instead the sermon is about us and the fact that Herod the Great thinks like us: one mountain, one king. He acts on that conviction as soon as he hears that there is another person in his realm with his title. But in this case, of course, Herod is wrong. The “newborn” King of the Jews is no threat to Herod.

But that’s true only if Herod is the sort of King the Kings of the Jews were supposed to be. Which, of course, Herod is not. We see that in the episode that follows our text. When Herod finds out that the Magi bypassed Jerusalem on their way back home, he smells treachery, thinks he’s threatened, and slaughters his own citizens in his mad conviction that he can thereby preserve his title and turf.

Jewish kings were anointed by God to shepherd God’s people, not to slaughter them. You remember the first one who really had the title: David. When David got his job

assignment, God's agent, Samuel, said: "No change, David, in the job-description as you move from shepherding Jesse's sheep to shepherding God's chosen people. The job's the same. Just the flock is different. Thus the specs are the same: when push comes to shove, you protect the sheep even if it costs you your own life. It's not the other way round: that the sheep die so that you can stay alive."

So Herod's already fudging on the specs of his job. Not just at the edges, but right at the center.

Jewish kings are supposed to be different. They are to model God's way of operating. Even though God is the One in charge, God does not clutch the perks of divinity in a tight fist. Instead with open hand God shares the divine perks, spreading them around to the small fry, the clearly non-kingly crowd. The godly model which Jewish kings were called to replicate is one of inclusion, not exclusion. The assignment might be seen like this: So you're the one sitting on the throne? Good, now spread your royalty around. Make all those folks "under" you into queens and kings in their own right. Yes, but won't that water down the title? Not if your title is "King of the Jews." The contract, the covenant, for kings in the Davidic line, is to elevate everybody to royalty, so that when the job is finally finished—if it ever gets that far—everybody is a somebody. There are no nobodies left.

But Herod was himself following the wrong star about his kingship. His star was not the Davidic star for Kingship at all, but a Gentile star—as Matthew will say later in his gospel—a star that says: it's top dog and underdog in the real world, and if I'm on top, you are going to stay under. And if you object, then you'll soon be six feet under.

But, of course, Herod is wrong, dead wrong. Sure you can practice radical exclusion of everybody to maintain your title and turf. But when you do that, you are inviting the God who appoints kings to play the same game with you. And God does do just that—excludes excluders.

You know how the rest of this infancy story goes. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus escape in the nick of time. They go into hiding in Egypt. By the time chapter 2 comes to an end, Herod is dead and the new-born King of the Jews is alive and well and growing up right smack dab in Herod's old turf. So even though Herod's kids—those that survived the palace purges—rule in his place, the newborn King of the Jews is on the scene. Just watch him if you want to see one finally do it right.

Meanwhile back to the Magi. Nothing in the text suggests that there were three of them. Nothing suggests that they were kings. No evidence is there for camels. The only term in the text is Magi (*magoi* in Greek). And nobody really knows what that word means. All the best guesses signal that they were big shots in something or other—maybe astronomy (or astrology), scientists, philosophers, maybe some of the Jewish folk from old Babylon who never made it back to Judea when the O.T. exile was over, but who had kept on studying the Hebrew Bible.

Big shots from somewhere, significant others, following a star, but initially they wind up at the wrong place looking for the newborn King of the Jews. They come to Jerusalem, to the royal palace, the natural place you'd expect to find a newly-born crown prince. But that's not the place to find a genuine King of the Jews, one whose job assignment is to make everybody royalty, make them all big shots. In their heads or hearts the Magi are at first as astray as Herod himself—and that's why they are so like us.

Where do we go to find the makers and shakers? We go to the capital city, where the big shots are. We do the same in our thinking about the church. Where do you direct someone who wants to know where to find the important people in the ELCA? Without even thinking, most of us would say, "Higgins Road up in Chicago." Surely not Bethel Lutheran congregation.

Like the Magi, like Herod, we are hooked on the point-up pyramid, as our model for how things really run. Upward mobility is our notion too of what's to aim for. The downward mobility of the Messiah in the Manger sounds like nonsense, or even worse, suicidal. Yet that is the secret of the real King of the Jews. You don't find him entering at Jerusalem, but at Bethlehem. Bethlehem is the boonies. Worse than that, if heavenly holiness was your point of origin, hob-knobbing with sinners is really downward mobility. And if such affiliation with sinners will eventually entail your death—as indeed it will—you have gone down about as far as any King can get.

But that's the kind of King all of us Magi-types need. For in our own way we too replicate their mistake and think of people and of our selves in terms of proximity to the point of the pyramid, the top rung on the corporate ladder. And like Herod the Great, who among us, yes, us Christians does not exclude others, even dear and close others, from the pyramids we are working on for ourselves? How often do you really enjoy having someone from down there come up to share your status, your prestige, your position, your pay scale?

Our American slang has come up with the term "put down." That's a very Herodian expression. And who of us doesn't do it—and get it done to us in return? Even those of us who think of ourselves at the bottom of the totem pole have the Herod within us to claim our higher rank over those who are not as humble, or as kind, or as long-suffering as we are. The Pharisee thanked God in the parable that he was not like the tax collector at the back of the church and the bottom of the social scale. But the tax-collector in all of us likes to thank God that we are not like those self-righteous Pharisees with all their high-brow hokum.

The non-Christian alternative, this Herodian hangup, is real for every one of us Christians: to survive by getting ahead and staying there by whatever means it takes—legal, of course—to stay as far up as we've gotten.

But the God who really is king and runs the world's show says: I exclude excluders, and that means you, Ed Schroeder, and each of you/us here in this morning's congregation.

So what to do? How to go home from church today by a way different from the way we came?

Answer: If Jerusalem signals the Herodian hangup, then make a Bethlehem detour. Check out the new-born King of the Jews again—and again, and again.... But not as a model of how we could do it too if we just tried harder. Trying harder sounds too much like the point-up pyramid. And at root it is. It signals living by achievements. Climbing some sort of ladder—with every rung higher, higher.

Not so with the downward mobility of the Babe of Bethlehem, the Messiah in the Manger, the genuine Shepherd King. “Shepherd” is the key. Shepherd, as David was called to be. How Jesus does this is what the rest of Matthew’s Gospel is all about. The Magi episode is really Matthew’s overture to the rest of the symphony.

For Jesus too the temptation throughout Matthew is to use his authority in Herodian fashion, save his own skin and let others pay the price, let sinners do their own dying, pay the price for their own Herodian practice. But Jesus wants it otherwise. His calling is not to lord it over the weak and the helpless, folks like us, just plain sinners. He exercises his authority under, not over, the weak and heavy laden, holding them up, taking the flak that they have coming to them. His classic line was: “I have come not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life a ransom for many.”

No wonder we all (as sinners) scramble so much to save our lives, our reputations, our jobs, our turfs. We must sense that they are already forfeited and that some day soon these IOU’s are going to be called in and we’re sure to lose. When the Good Shepherd gives his life as a ransom for us, he is offering to trade with us, to swap us his life for our own, to take our overdrawn accounts and make them his own. He offers what Luther called the “sweet swap”: his life with all its plusses, in exchange for ours with all its minuses, debts, liabilities, hangups, etc.

Matthew cites the classic words of Isaiah to help his readers comprehend what Jesus is doing: “This was the fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.” (8:17) The conclusion of Jesus’ trade-off with sinners comes, of course, as the end of the story, when he takes our death, our God-forsakenness, upon himself and offers us his God-connectedness, and says: sinner that you are, enjoy these connections. This sweet swap started at Christmas. We sang about it in Nikolaus Herman’s great Christmas hymn, LBW 47 vv. 4 & 5.

The cure for our Herodianism is this alternate King of the Jews who uses his authority, his clout, his status with God, for us, not against us. When he measures us for our virtue and notes that we are running on empty, he does not read us the riot act, but says: “Here tank up on my holiness, my keeping the faith, my going the extra mile, and count it as your own. That is the only reason I came, that you might get God’s own life back into you, and then get it full up. It’s a freebie. No strings attached. No gifts required in return.”

And thereby we return to the Magi, who did give the newborn King of the Jews their gifts. For Matthew, they model what later will be called discipleship. Admittedly, they came on the scene with herodian notions about power and authority. But when the word of God directs them to go to the upside-down-pyramid to find the King, they believe the word, follow its signals and exchange their lives with the King in the cowstall, the Baby in the Boonies.

We should not interpret their “worship” as a one-way exchange, whereby they gave poor little Jesus the big presents so that he wouldn’t have to be so far below the poverty line. The biggest gift-transfer going on at Bethlehem is what they got that Herod didn’t get. They got the Shepherd King as their King, and that means as their servant to give his life as a ransom for theirs.

The symbols of their lives were the treasures they had accumulated. In presenting these to the Manged Messiah they swapped their lives for the gift of the Shepherd King himself. In Matthew’s gospel that is regularly called faith. When Jesus takes someone’s sickness upon himself and gives them healing, he regularly comments: your faith has made you well, your faith has saved you. Faith makes the sweet swap real. Jesus can offer the swap till his arms ache with holding it out to us. Only when we trust it, does it actually become our property. When we trust the swap, it’s ours. When we don’t trust it, we don’t have it.

Trusting the sweet offer from this Shepherd-King is the generator for us too to follow the Magi in the last item of their recorded history: and they returned home via another route. They took the Jerusalem bypass, as Bob Bertram likes to say, after their exchange with Jesus. No more back to Jerusalem, no more hookups with the Herods of our world, whether the Herods of politics, the big shots of the workplace, the makers and shakers of the neighborhood, the positions of rank and authority over others in marriages and families.

They did return home, to their places in marriages, families, workplace, politics, neighborhoods, but by a different route. Not just the I-270 around Jerusalem; they bypassed the Herodian option in their daily lives back home where they came from. The word Magi probably signals authority of some sort, but now they no longer “have to” be Herodian in these positions of authority, with their skills, their accomplishments, and the pride of person that they did indeed have. No more “lording it over” anybody from these positions, since they were now “Lorded over” by the one who put his Lordship under them all the way to the cross.

So, clued in by the Baby King, they took their cues from him for exercising the authority they did have. Were they half-way up on some corporate ladder? They used that rung as a perch on which to be servants of those Christ put around them—no matter what the management said they had to do with subordinates. And for those above them who may have wanted to treat them as slaves, they one-upped them and served them as though serving Christ.

You get the point. They turned their worlds upside down just by being upside-down triangles in an otherwise point-up-triangle world. So what else is new?

Our celebration of the Epiphany of our Lord is complete when we reimage the magi. Take account of our own Herodian hang-ups, 'fess up to the exclusionary damage we've done, acknowledge the fix we are in were God to close accounts now just on the basis of our management of our own lives and relationships.

Then move from our own Jerusalems to the original Bethlehem and the Shepherd King who's at home with the down-and-outers. Exchange our lives—again—there, enjoy the sweet swap for ourselves, and then get back to our regular turfs, but go back there in a different way, taking the Jerusalem bypass, as little Christs, on assignment to be Christ-on-location in the point-up pyramids of the world where God has placed us.

“Go in peace, serve the Lord,” we'll hear in half an hour. That means serve the Lord out there in the world. The newborn King came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life. That's the serving we're getting set for in this liturgy this morning—to make Epiphany happen out there, to have Christ appear in the “different way we go” at home, at work, and in between. Christians live on the Jerusalem bypass by constantly re-routing our lives via Bethlehem.

Take any point-up pyramid, triangular organization chart, that you live and/or work in. Fix your location in that pyramid. At that point put the triangle of your own life point-down. And then expand it. What do you get? The star of David, the trademark of our Shepherd King. Of course, it does have a cross in the center—you give your life for others.

But that's still the star to go by. Any other star is a dis-aster, a bad star. The Epiphany of our Lord is the appearance of this star for you and me in our lives here and now. Hitch your wagon to this star. It works. We have God's word for it. That's the Good News for Epiphany 1991.

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