



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

The Other Side of Christmas

Sermon by Pastor John Strommen

on Matthew 2:1-23

Sunday, January 6, 2019

Welcome to the Christmas story according to Matthew! While Luke's version is an intimate little affair, taking place in a stable with shepherds and farm animals, Matthew's version is the opposite. It's about royalty. A king has been born who is an affront and a threat to the local king.

While Luke is more focused on the *announcement* of the incarnation, Matthew is focused on the real-world *impact* of the incarnation. A new king has arrived, but, you see, the people of Judea already have a king. They don't like him, but he will not be interested in sharing his throne.

This is reminiscent of 1930's Germany after the rise of Hitler's Nationalist party. As Hitler consolidated control of Germany, he then demanded that the German Lutheran church confess Jesus' rule in a way that did not challenge Hitler's rule. There's only room for one kingdom, you see. Ernst Kasemann, a German New Testament scholar agreed. There is only room for one kingdom: God's. Kasemann became noteworthy by publicly confessing that Jesus - and Jesus alone - was the Lord of all, including Germany. He was thrown in prison for this confession. But he was right: God's reign in Christ is a counter proposal to the kingdoms of this world and its very substance is a threat to human power.

So, anyone who says Jesus is not political is wrong. He's a king – he has a kingdom - so of course he's political. Neither can one say that Jesus is concerned only with a spiritual kingdom, but not this world. He came into this world as a human being not to abandon it, but to reclaim, restore and recreate this world in all of its dimensions: social, economic, ecological, spiritual, private, and public. Jesus is the embodiment of a kingdom – God's kingdom - that uses power to foster and protect life. Earthly kingdoms all too often use life – and lives - to foster and protect power. These two are not compatible, and one must choose which kingdom you are a part of. It means if you choose alignment with God's kingdom that we are called to push back in civil protest when our earthly kingdoms are abusing power and not stewarding life. Remember, power is *always, always* a deeply spiritual matter.

So, what does the world of Jesus' time make of Christ, the "newborn king"? King Herod was the king of the district of Judea, and quite literally, the "king of the Jews." Herod, though, was nothing more than an extremely corrupt and willing puppet of the Romans. Only marginally a Jew himself in bloodlines and in practice, he was even more marginally interested in serving the needs of the Jewish people. He was much more interested in protecting his privilege. There is no evidence he knew anything of the birth of Jesus, though. Even Zoroastrians from far away were more aware of the newborn king than was Herod. At least three of them were.

Enter "we three kings" who weren't kings at all, but wealthy Persian astrologers who believed an important sign had been revealed regarding a savior, so they followed a star in the west. The Jewish scriptures were known fairly well by other nations at this time, including all over Persia, where people practiced Zoroastrianism. Some were even quite versed on the prophecies about a savior. So, these three wise men, and probably others, traveled far, crossing borders to strange lands to give lavish gifts to a newborn king. Only this king was not in succession with the Roman appointed king. So, why would these astrologers do this? Why heap this kind of risk upon yourselves? Their presence could easily have been seen as an attempt to foment an uprising.

Why then? Probably because they believed this was no mere political king, but a savior. And it doesn't matter what part of the globe you hail from, you are living in a broken world and therefore you have hopes and fears. Did they think that maybe, just maybe, as "O Little Town of Bethlehem" tells us, that "their hopes and fears were met in thee tonight"? A true king and a life-giving kingdom, that only God can create, will draw people to it, people of any ethnicity, any persuasion, even crossing dangerous boundaries to do it.

Call them spiritual refugees, seekers who must cross boundaries to find their spiritual home.

Indeed, King Herod's spies picked up the presence of these Persian visitors and summoned them to his throne, quickly learning of their intentions. He needed to know where this child was that they sought, so the wise men were now recruited as spies for the king. Interestingly, this visit by the wise men was not just days after the birth, but probably two years later.

So, the wise men continued to follow the star to Bethlehem, they found Mary and her child, gave their gifts to him, and were filled with great joy. Then after being warned in a dream not to report back to King Herod, they dodged him, returning home by a different road.

The wise men weren't the only ones who had a dream. Joseph had a dream also, in which the Lord told Joseph that Herod was out to destroy Jesus. They were instructed to flee to Egypt until Herod died. It says this was to fulfill a prophecy

that “out of Egypt I have called my son.” I might add, it was also to keep Jesus alive. So here you have Jesus and his family fleeing persecution to take refuge in a land legendary for its oppression: Egypt. Ironies abound. And yes, this means Jesus was a refugee. He was a refugee as a child. Like many families in this broken world where its various kingdoms don’t foster life, but simply raw power, Jesus’ family was on the run because they had no choice.

And who is supposed to care for such families as these - the marginalized, the vulnerable, the homeless, the immigrants? The kingdom of God to which we belong has something to say about that.

Meanwhile, Herod, enraged by the wise men’s evasion of him, ordered that all male children age two or younger, in and around Bethlehem, be killed. From what we know of Herod, this was not uncharacteristic of him to do such a thing.

Eventually, after Herod died, Joseph and Mary, with Jesus, moved back to Israel, but to a different district than Judea. It turned out, Herod’s son who succeeded him was just as ruthless as his dad. So, Jesus and his parents settled in Nazareth. And the rest is history.

The tension between Jesus and this world never went away. Jesus’ kingdom - and the values of that kingdom - was not only very different from the kingdoms around him, it was incompatible. And that is why he was eventually killed. Jesus, you see, showed us all that in God’s kingdom, the most vulnerable people who get kicked around in this world, are the apple of God’s eye. They matter. And to be their advocates is deeply political. To heal and forgive people who didn’t deserve it was an affront to the social and political order. Still is today. To advocate allocating resources for the vulnerable, whether it’s food, shelter or health care, is political. It’s also kingdom work.

It’s interesting to take notice of how kingdoms and cultures juxtaposing with one another in this world displace people in the Christmas story. And so, it is, that Christ the newborn king entered a world where innocents suffer and people flee in terror. And when they cannot flee, they may become refugees in their own land. You remember how the Christmas story begins in Luke, with the Roman governor, Quirinius, calling for a census where many, especially the least powerful, must uproot, cross boundaries and travel to their place of origin to enroll. Now, in the Roman Empire, a census like this was not held to ensure representation in congress. It was done to intimidate, and often as a means to conscript people into the army to fight wars for the Roman Emperor. So, Mary and Joseph’s lives were massively disrupted by the kingdom of Rome. This is the world we live in. This is why God came to be with us, we flee, we seek, we are displaced. If not literally, emotionally. And God says, “I will be with you in your most powerless moments.”

There are a growing number of people in our world who are spiritual refugees like the three wise men. As the U2 song goes, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for," is a mantra for so many. Such a snapshot of this world: people crossing boundaries either to flee or to seek. Political refugees, spiritual refugees.

Our church, this one right here, stands at a crossroads. We, like many churches out there, lament how people today are not interested in God. We say that because they don't come to church. But the truth is, everyone is seeking a kingdom - a world - that gives them hope and addresses their fears. The world around us is full of wise men and women seeking a sign. A sign of hope that their lives aren't meaningless, that there's something bigger out there. Hope that they can find healing for the shame or depression that plagues their spirits. That they can find rest from their fleeing and seeking and find what they're looking for.

And people fear. They fear that they will run out of money, not have adequate health care, not find a community to which they can belong. They fear they will be deported or persecuted for their ethnicity or beliefs. These people are all around us, in fact they are us. They are looking for peace, the peace that only a "peaceable kingdom" can offer.

The newborn king is the king of this peaceable kingdom, crossing and transcending all borders in order to unite us all. In this king, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in a God who uses his power to foster and nourish life. How can we let good news like this sink in? How can we share good news such as this? How can we connect with the seekers who are not in here, but out there?

And when we see people who are refugees, can we recognize they are the children of a broken world, where kingdoms too often crush spirits? Can we see that this is why Jesus came?

Perhaps each one of us can be a sign of hope to someone that a savior has come into this world, and with it, a kingdom that nurtures life. Amen.