

## *Where Is the King of the Jews?*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
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*Preached on 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, (8Jan), 2023.*

Text: Matthew 2:1-2

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

Mark Twain once quipped, “Most people come to church to listen to a sermon not because they are burning with a desire to know who the Jebusites were.” In the same way we could spend the morning discussing who these three were, who King Herod was, where they all came from and what this business about a star means. But I think instead I want to allegorize on the text a bit, zeroing in on their question, “*Where is ...the king of the Jews?*”

The question is direct, mysterious, and odd all at the same time. It struck Herod and his advisors in the same way. Why would anyone assume a star could lead you to a king? The question itself reveals the hiddenness of Jesus’ birth: not in Jerusalem, not in a palace. He was born in Bethlehem where an obscure Hebrew prophet prior to the exile some 700 years before the time of Jesus had predicted he would be born.<sup>1</sup> Herod’s advisors knew this<sup>2</sup> but like many things written in the Bible, they didn’t really believe it would come true in their lifetime. So, though expected, the birth was hidden. Odd, too, that the family into which he was born lived in Nazareth, way up in the Galilee. The arrival of three orientalists with camels and a large retinue caused a sensation in the capital. Matthew said that Herod and ‘all Jerusalem with him’ were frightened by their arrival.<sup>3</sup> After all, they had a king, Herod the Great, who was just a figurehead for the Caesar in Rome. A new king would upset the balance. Though the status quo was not ideal, a new king would derail the prevailing order. Though some in the city might have favored anyone else besides the compromised Herod; most would not. So, *frightened*.

The question —“*Where is the... king...?*”— is, though odd and mysterious, still a question that very much could be asked by us and of us. Though we live in a different time and context, in what way is the question asked of us? This is what I meant by allegorizing the question. A king is someone in charge. We don’t much think of kings in our Western democracy but we know what one is. A king doesn’t have to answer to the people, people answer to the king. If we take king out of the political realm and think of it in spiritual terms one of the realities is we all still have something king-like in our lives, controlling our choices, motivating us in certain directions, and revealing what we value. There is a throne to which each of us pays

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 5:2.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 2:4-6.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 2:3.

homage, owes allegiance and is head over us. When God doesn't sit on that throne, who or what does? Where is your king? Who or what sits on the throne of your life?

For some of us it is King Jesus who occupies our throne. But if not him, it is a profound truth that something else inevitably takes his place. Ego, material possessions, ambition, political power, a political utopia, a substance like alcohol, an abusive relative: each of these substitutes can rule our lives when the true God is not acknowledged. So the question—*where and who is your king?*—is a very significant question. It is absolutely the question we ought to ask. What is driving us? Where is that force taking us? What are we living for? All of these are variations on the question, *where and who is your king?*

Now the Magi asked their question with a qualifier. Where is the ....king of the Jews? Matthew, in some respects, is the most Jewish of the gospel authors. This story of the three visitors is puzzling in Matthew because the three had to be Gentiles from the east, Persia or somewhere like Petra in modern day Jordan.<sup>4</sup> They wanted to know the whereabouts of the child born as *King of the Jews*. This is interesting because there were many kings in the Levant. Matthew reported these three came there searching for a Jewish King. The three symbolize the universal importance of Jesus, to both Jew and Gentile, but there is more. I think we see here these three were on a spiritual quest, looking for a king that was not just like other rulers. Going back to the question of the occupants of the thrones of our lives, these three men were wise to the ways of the world. If a legitimate God does not occupy the throne of one's life, many illegitimate rivals will try to sit on that throne. The God of Israel held a particular fascination in the world of that time for several reasons. The God of the Jews was one God without need for multiple Gods. The text of scripture taught that this one God was dominant over all the earth, not just one piece of real estate. Moreover, this one God promulgated and expected clear ethical demands. We don't realize just how different this was from views of the gods in other cultures at the time. So when the three asked, *where is the ... king of the Jews*, the qualifier indicates they were searching for more than a politician or ruler. There is an implicit spiritual dimension to their quest. Again, there must be a similar question asked by and of us. Where is the one called king of the Jews?

Here's one more little secret about this title *King of the Jews*. In two places in the Old Testament,<sup>5</sup> conflict over the use of the title for human kings is revealed. The Judge Gideon and the Prophet Samuel both said, *God* is the true king of our people. So when Matthew reported this old legend about three magi coming to pay homage to the king of the Jews, there is more in his mind that diplomatic protocol. Matthew is making a claim about Jesus; that he is both human and God. In the same way there ought to be more in our minds when I ask us where is the king of our lives? Is it the Lord or some other pretender? Where and who is the king of your life? of our life

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<sup>4</sup> There is the motif of fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, both with the birth in Bethlehem as well as in Isaiah 60, particularly verse 3 and 6: "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." This text also was associated with the arrival of the Messiah by first century rabbis.

<sup>5</sup> Judges 8:23 and 1Samuel 8:4-20.

together? Have we done more than merely posit a vague belief in an ancient deity? Have we put the true King in charge of our lives, our future, our values, our direction?

End

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