

Title: Promises Made, Promises Kept – pt.2; Born Where?

Text: Matthew 2.1-6

Theme: Promises Made, Promises Kept

Series: Advent 2007 #2

Prop Stmt.

Read Text:

It was not something that anyone could have expected. On Britain's television version of American Idol, called Britain's Got Talent, a cell-phone salesman by the name of Paul Potts came on to the stage. When asked what he was going to do, he replied somewhat emotionless, that he would like to sing some opera. A quick glance at Paul, would not give you the impression that this guy could sing anything, much less opera. But then he sings, and I've got to tell you that it takes your breath away, and I don't even like opera. The response is overwhelming. Audience members start crying. The judges are stunned. And before he concludes the short version of his song, the place is on its feet both in thunderous applause and cheering. It is an incredible scene. And Paul in typical British fashion stands there, as if all that he has done, is solved one side of a rubric's cube. Who would have thought? Who could have ever imagined that hidden within the veneer of a cellphone salesman was such a beautiful and powerful voice?

Sometimes, the most incredible people come from the most unlikely places. At least that is how it appears to us. It apparently appeared that way to Herod and others as well. King Herod had a tenuous hold on the throne in Israel. Ever since the days when the armies of Alexander the Great marched through that region of the world, the little land of Palestine had been like the rag in the middle of the tug of war. For over 200 years it was pulled west by the Ptolemaic dynasty centered in Egypt and then fought over and pulled east by the Seleucid dynasty which was initially centered in Babylon until it moved to Syria and then it was pulled west again and then east again. Finally, Rome moved in and Rome demanded loyalty, peace and taxes. So, they put someone on the throne who would give them all three. Through plots, conspiracies, lies and intrigue, Herod was able to gain the position of king. He was an Edomite who sat on a Jewish throne. He was not in the line of David, yet he ruled from the capital city that David had established. He knew it and so did everyone else. He was a pretend king. People who conspire against others are generally conspired against. Herod's reign is chronicled with killing all potential threats to his power. When this entourage of Magi arrive from the east, from the region of the former Seleucid dynasty, Herod, who already could give aspirin a headache and keep sleeping pills awake, is disturbed. And when Herod is disturbed, the whole city is disturbed. These Magi, as their name indicates are mysterious men of a priestly caste who possess secret knowledge and powers. They are from a long line of a rather secret society of astrologers, and historians and magicians (but not in an entertainment variety) who in many ways were the real power behind the power of the thrones in the east. To many, they were the real king-makers. So, when these stealthily men appear in Jerusalem looking for the king who was born, Herod's slippery grasp on the throne was just given a fresh coat of grease. There are three things that they say that threaten this pretend king to the core of his imposter heart. 1) Where is the one who has

been born king of the Jews? The message is powerful. There is one who has been BORN KING. This king does not need political connections, secret deals and conspiracies to ascend to and hang on to the throne. He was born King. Being born king implies an inherent right that cannot be denied. Like “Prince John”, the pretend occupant of the throne in the story of Robin Hood who heard that the real king, King Richard had returned, Herod knew he was in trouble. 2) “We saw his star in the east!” Think of that for a minute! Did a star appear in the sky when you were born? NO! Neither did a star appear when Herod was born. These were the star masters of their day. If they said a new star had appeared that was the star of a new king born to this region, then the implications are universal. Whoever this king is, his life is in some manner connected to powers beyond this earth! 3) Then perhaps the clincher, they said, we “have come to worship him.” To these magi, there was no question that this one who was born was a legitimate king. They did not come to investigate, and then make an opinion about the matter. They came to worship. This king was deity and when you encounter deity, you worship. But, where? Where was this king supposed to be born? The answer had been given, 700 years earlier by the prophet Micah. He would be born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem? You’ve got to be kidding me! That little non-descript village! That’s about as likely as a cell-phone salesman singing opera!

Bethlehem is a compound word that means House of Lahmu (house of bread). There are two locations called Bethlehem in Israel. In this text as well as in Luke 2, this Bethlehem is mentioned in connection with Judah to distinguish it from the other Bethlehem located in the northern area of Zebulun. Even to this day Bethlehem is not huge by modern standards. It currently has a population of about 22,000. But in the days of Christ, it was nothing more than a village which sat about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. Not far from Bethlehem, Rachel was buried after giving birth to Benjamin. David watched sheep in that area, and was anointed as king there as well. In spite of giving birth to the most popular king of Israel, it was dwarfed by Jerusalem. But forever, the lazy, forgotten and insignificant city of Bethlehem was about to be changed.

If Herod was not already making coffee nervous, he was about to, for the prophecy that pointed to the location of the birth pointed out a few other things as well, one of which states, that “out of you will come a ruler.” Again, the message is clear. This ruler is from them, in contrast to Herod, who was not “out of you.” And this is a ruler who does not use his power to destroy, but he uses his position to shepherd. And he shepherds MY people Israel. Which being translated and applied means – Herod, this ain’t your kingdom! You’ve got no rights here! These are “MY people.” Who is doing the talking here? It is God. A look back at the origin of this prophecy will help us see how the incredible connection that this has on so many levels. God is so amazing. These prophecies are more than just secret clues that prove the authenticity of God’s Word, these prophecies are staggering promises that carry with them a long hope for dark nights, and at the same time are frightening warnings of judgment to those who pretend to be a king. Turn to the book of Micah. This pre-exilic prophet to the southern kingdom overlapped with Isaiah whom we looked at last week. While Isaiah tended to work pretty close to the king’s courts, Micah (whose name means: “Who is like Yahweh?”) ministered to the common person. The Assyrian empire was expanding under the

leadership of Tiglathpileaser. History would conclude that his conquering of Syria and the Northern kingdom of Israel was due to his aggressive imperialistic agenda. But history without the Bible cannot tell you the entire story. The ultimate reason was not imperialistic tendencies, but a Sovereign God who fulfilled his promise to judge the disobedience and rebellion of his own people. Micah could point to the historical realities taking place a few miles to the north to illustrate the points of his messages from God. God fulfills His Word. While Micah lived and ministered as a prophet, Assyria conquered the N. Kingdom and almost conquered Judah, but God intervened in an incredible way during the reign of Hezekiah. The main sins that Micah addresses, interestingly enough are the sins of those who are in power. People who are in positions of power can easily be deceived into thinking that they really are in charge. Leadership is such a frightening thing. It is wrought with so many pitfalls, one of which is using your position for yourself instead for your people. You see, leaders are ultimately supposed to be reflections of the ultimate leader – God, who uses his power to speak the truth, consistently follow his Word and truly love his people, even if He needs to die for them. But, we are not used to leaders like that. We are used to leaders who use people to gain power and then use that power only to stay in power, even if it means destroying the very ones they are charged with leading.

One time when Christian writer and thinker Ravi Zacharias was in Cambodia, he saw a play that illustrates this point so well.

A peasant man married a young village woman and were joyfully going to another village in order to get a piece of property and start their life together, when the prince of the land who happened to be traveling by was so taken by the beauty of the girl that he demanded that she come with him. Men, under the authority of the prince were ordered to beat her husband, and she was taken away by the prince. In spite of the beating, the peasant man followed as best he could and many days later he came to the palace where he told the king what had happened. The king appeared to be outraged and demanded a public hearing. When the girl was brought forth, she was asked who her true husband was. The moment of truth came when she said that it was the prince. Behind the scene the woman had been told that if she told the truth, her husband would be executed. Upon hearing her words, the peasant man was completely undone. The king's friends who had crowded the court shouted as the young peasant cowered in rejection and defeat.

The priest watching the event wasn't cheering. He had rightfully reasoned why a peasant man would risk his life for such a thing, unless the man was completely delusional, there had to be more to this story. So, the priest devised a plan. He said that he had a truth serum that if taken would within 10 minutes cause the person to speak the truth. Knowing that either the prince or the peasant was lying, and that the liar would be punished by death for the crime, he said, I suggest that each of these men be given five minutes lone with the woman, but that no physical contact be allowed between them. Then in a strange way to carry this out, he instructed that a large pole be brought used that had a barrel suspended from the middle. The prince had to carry one end of the pole and the peasant the other. This way, they were separated from each other, while the weight on their shoulders prevented them from being able to do anything that would

physically harm or threaten the girl. Holding his end of the pole, the prince was the first to have five minutes with the girl. Going to a secluded spot the prince continued the threats and added that if she told the truth, that she would be killed. When the peasant man was alone with her, she told him of the threats against him and her as they both confessed their love for the other.

When they returned to the courtroom, the verdict was determined by the priest who went to the barrel and opened it up. Inside was a boy who with a pad and pencil had recorded everything that had been said in the private conversations. As the truth came out, the audience in the theater cheered, believing that a verdict of justice was coming. But then, in the play, the king ordered his soldiers to kill everyone in the court who believed what the boy had written. The end.

Micah, speaking as a prophet for God says, “Hold the phone. It’s not the end – yet!” To those leaders whom he describes in chapter 2 as laying awake at night devising up schemes in order to use their power to take property and homes from people, to the political leaders who in chapter 3 were killing those who stood in their way, to the prophets who pretended to speak on behalf of God, but only told them what they wanted to hear and could be bribed to say just about anything, God says that it is not over. To these political rulers who were destroying God’s people and to the religious leaders who were abusing their role and using it only for themselves, God gives them an enormous warning.

In chapter 5.2, God says, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah (ancient name of Bethlehem cf. Genesis 35.19) though you are small (insignificant) among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old from ancient times.” Verse 4 goes on to say, “He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace.”

This prophecy of Micah’s understood in the context of his warning to the political and religious leaders of Israel should have put them to their knees. God Himself was coming to take care of His people and to deal with those who abusing them. What I find so fascinating is that when these Magi show up in Jerusalem looking for the Christ, the chief priests and teachers of the law go to Micah’s passage that stands as an enormous warning to them and the king. Do they believe it? The king does – partially. Herod had, what I describe as “Unbelieving Faith”. You see, Herod believed the prophecy as fact, but disbelieved the implications. He believed the portion of the prophecy that spoke about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. On that point, Herod believed what God said, but was so blinded by his own self-worship and feeling of power that he attempts to kill this one who Micah describes as having an origin that is of old, from ancient times and who will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.

Now, think about this for a minute. If God is powerful enough to orchestrate history so that the Messiah is born in a specific place, that God spoke about 700 years before, and this same God has the authority and power to arrange the appearance of a star, (think of the universal implications of that) would God not also be powerful enough to orchestrate history so that this same Messiah is protected from the evil machinations of a wicked and deluded king? Controlling history for 700 years and arranging stars in space is some pretty serious power. Who does Herod think he is able to stand against that power and kill the One whom God has ordained? What is one little paranoid king able to do against Almighty God? Herod, are you crazy? Herod does not think that way, does he? Sin is always irrational. It makes us think that we are in charge, and that we can do what we want with God's Word. That brings me to the Application:

Application:

1. Stars don't determine your future – God does (by His Word).

It is so easy to believe in forces and powers, and predictions and calendars, fortunes and all sorts of things that take your hope and confidence away from God. Don't put your hope in stars. Put your hope in the One who made the stars. The Bethlehem star pointed to Christ. That is the purpose of all creation. We are to point to the Creator. When you trust your future to anything or anyone other than God, you will be destroyed by the "what ifs". Trust in the One who has determined the What.

2. Unbelieving faith is a highly deceitful form of unbelief.

Herod's faith illustrates what so many of us want to do. We want to pick and choose what part of the promises that we like. We like the part where we are promised eternal life if we place our faith in Christ. But, what do you do with the part that says IF you have put your faith in Christ, then you will love God's family? IF you have put your faith in Christ, you will obey His commands? IF you have put your faith in Christ, you will stop leading a life of sin? What do you do with those parts?

It is shocking to see how so many claim Christ as Savior, but use the forgiving part as an excuse or even justification for disobedience. God's Word is not a buffet line, where you only put on your plate the parts that you like. All of God's Word is God's Word. All of God's Word matters. All of God's Word is authoritative, effective, powerful and eternal. You are accountable to the whole deal. Your thought life, private life, habits, and secrets are not an exception. Herod was not above God, neither are you.

3. God finishes what He starts.

God keeps His promises. If you are seeking to obey God and are living under the crushing weight of a sinful authority, God knows. God knows the way of the righteous. God sees. God acts. God moves. He has the whole world in His hand and under His thumb. His Word is forever settled in heaven. These light, but momentary afflictions are nonetheless real, but cannot begin to hold a candle to the exceeding glory that is ours in

Christ. God does not forget His promises. God does not forget His own. God finishes what He starts.

Question:

1. **Do you really want his kingdom to come if it means the king exposes the truth about your life?**

When I am more concerned about God's glory than my reputation, then I am. When I am more concerned about my private purity than my public perception, then I am. I fear that we are much like Herod and the chief priests. The coming of Christ would really mess up some of the idols that we have built for ourselves. I think I can say this in a theologically and personally correct way: To hell with our idols and reputation and pride. Let it go at the cross. Follow Christ as Savior and Sovereign who is the only who has the right to rule in your life.

2. **What promises of God do you need to claim?**

Bow heads:

Pray:

Confess:

Seek the Lord: