

Title: 2 Kings and 2 Kingdoms
Text: Matthew 2.1-12
Theme: The threat of truth
Series: Matthew #3
Prop Stmt: The true King threatens all false kings with exposure and defeat.

This week, the media has attempted to hype up the Super Bowl, and I grant you that many people, including myself enjoy a good football game. But, I resent being told what I have to watch and how I am supposed to feel about what I watch. For me, it is like sitting at a ball game and the big screen tells me to cheer, or clap, or do it louder.... I talk back and say, do something on the field that is worthy of cheering and I will cheer. But I am not going to cheer, simply because some sign tells me to. But, there is more to it than that. I am aware, that today in remote villages in Kenya, in hidden enclaves of Cambodia and Thailand, in secret house churches in China, and in humble gatherings in Russia the gospel is being preached and people are trusting Christ. Compared to the massive production and technological wizardry of the Super Bowl, it does not look impressive, but to the eye and heart of God, it is absolutely thrilling. For this reason, I am so desirous to preach this text. I pray that you, like the magi, will encounter Christ.

Read Text:

From the very beginning of Matthew's gospel, the purpose of this book is very, very clear. His theme is: Behold your King! (and his kingdom) His message is: this King is like no other. He is God and he is Savior. His reign starts in your heart. He relentlessly assaults the kingdom of your heart, where you have made yourself king. That is why the coming of Christ then, and the message of Christ now, is the most glorious and the most threatening thing that you could ever imagine. It is glorious if you embrace Him as King. It is devastatingly threatening if you are worshiping anything or anyone else, particularly yourself. Matthew writes with a Jewish audience primarily, but not exclusively in view. He selects and organizes his material in a way to prove to his own people, and to us that Jesus is the King who was promised in the OT. Here in the 2nd chapter he is writing about the birth of Jesus (v.18). Instead of telling us every detail, he goes back to the OT and finds prophecies that predicted the birth of Christ and then tells us parts of the birth account of Christ that demonstrate how those were fulfilled. There are 5 of those. We looked at the 1st one two weeks ago. Today we are looking at the 2nd fulfillment which is found in Micah 5.2. Keep in mind that Matthew is carefully and systematically laying out an argument proving that Jesus Christ is the King who was promised. This truth is embraced by some, and hated by many. Why? Why is Jesus Christ so hated? Simply put, he threatens those who think that they are in charge because he exposes our true condition. He exposes, what we are trying to hide. And ironically, religion and power can be masterful disguises used to hide your own failures.

How do you handle failure? Yesterday, I was reminded of my failure in a frustrating way. I spent 6.5 hours trying to replace a faucet. (contrast with blog that I wrote earlier in the week) The human condition is this: We are failures before God. I do not want to admit that. No one does. But, we must in order to be rescued by God's grace. That is what the

OT law is about. But what happened? The very law that was designed to humble the reader, became an excuse for pride and argument. How ironic! Imagine being marooned on an island without any hope of being able to rescue yourself, and a plane drops a package to you telling you that help is on the way, and instead of being excited, you try to shoot the plane down, because you don't want help. That is what is happening in this text and in the entire book of Matthew.

When we read these verses, we tend to think of a manger scene (which we should not) because the wise men showed up about one to two years after the birth of Christ. And we tend to think of Christmas pageants and Christmas cards. But, that is not what is going on here. In fact, Herod, at least to some degree, understood what this was about. He heard the news from the wise men that the king of the Jews had already been born. This was, in actuality, a declaration of war! Matthew is establishing this for us at the beginning of his book. There are 2 kings and 2 kingdoms that are locked in a battle for the affection and worship of your heart.

This event serves notice to us for what we can expect, not only from the rest of this book, but from our world when we align ourselves with Christ. The people who are drawn to Christ are not the ones that you would think and the ones whom you think would believe are the ones that hate him the most. That is what is so amazing about this account. These mysterious wise men (magi) show up in Jerusalem with news about a king of the Jews who had been born. This is not known to anybody of note in Jerusalem. This is odd. The people you think would know, do not. The people who know are not only a surprise, but they have more genuine interest in this king than anyone else. Those who are far away are drawn to Christ, while those who are close are threatened. Keep that in mind.

1. **The Revelation** – (1-6)

A. To the Gentiles

The wise men, were astronomers and astrologers from Persia. They held powerful positions in the Babylonian empire because they were consulted on a regular basis by the king. They studied the stars believing that the movement and positioning of the stars gave omens of warning, or notices of favor. So, when a new star appears in the sky, these men take this to be a very important divine message. In this case, they are right. I think that it is safe to assume that Daniel's presence in Babylon left a mark. He obviously had a copy of the Old Testament at least some of it. These men were familiar with it since they associated the star with the king of the Jews, which is what is predicted in Numbers 24.17. My guess is that in studying the sky, they saw a new star appear and then began to study all of their documents. In their reading, one of them came across Numbers 24.17. They agreed that this star must be referring to that star, so they headed to where you would expect a King from Judah to be born, and that is Jerusalem. It is really amazing, isn't it? Here are a group of men who you would consider to be extremely unlikely to trust in the God of Israel. Yet, here they are, having made a ridiculously long journey to Jerusalem, for the purpose of seeing and worshipping this new king! It is astounding. Tradition says that there were three and have even named them, although there is no

evidence for that. There were three types of gifts (11); gifts of gold, gifts of frankincense and gifts of myrrh. But that does not mean that there were three men. We sing about “We three Kings” but again there is nothing to suggest that they were kings.

So, they show up in Jerusalem, and ask Herod concerning the whereabouts of “he who has been born king of Jews.” Matthew records this conversation in such a way that it is clear that when the wise men ask this, they emphasize the word “born.” Notice that they do not say that he is born to be king, but that he is born king. He is already king! If you are Herod, the ground just shook. You are in deep weeds. Your game is over. Your cover is blown. Given the fact that Herod was not born king, but rather usurped the throne through shrewd diplomacy, and held on to the throne by killing anyone that he perceived to be a threat to him, including sons and wives, this news absolutely blew up his world. The word is translated “troubled” (3), but it could easily be translated as being in turmoil, or being terrified. Adding terror to his extreme insecurity is the news that “we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” Even here, the contrast is striking. Pagan astrologers from the hated “outcasts” have informed the Jews that their king was born. That’s rather embarrassing, don’t you think?

B. To the Jews

Now the revelation comes to the Jews. Here, Matthew introduces us to several groups. There is the king, Herod, who has an eerily resemblance to Denethor, the steward of Gondor in Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. He is the pretend king, and therefore he is threatened by news of a real king, as we will see. Then there are the chief priests. These are the heads of the 24 main orders of priests who serve in and around the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. Then there are the Scribes. These men used to simply copy the Scriptures. But over time, their position evolved to being a specific class of teachers who taught and applied the Scriptures.

Herod says what the rest are thinking. He identifies the birth of this king, and the appearance of this star with the coming of the Messiah (“the Christ”, v.4). And when he asks these men where the Messiah was to be born, they do not have to research the Scriptures, they already know. “It is written by the prophet”, which we know is Micah. And then they quote the passage. The prophecy is both amazing for its specificity, that is identifying Bethlehem (house of bread, named perhaps because of granaries were located there?) as the location of his birth, but also because this prophecy tells us about the nature of the king. He will be both a ruler and shepherd. Most of us, like these men, have lived with rulers or leaders who are in it for themselves. To work under, or live under a ruler who shepherds people is a rare treat. You would think that these men would be thrilled at this revelation. But, that is not seen here, is it? What becomes clear is that they have had the truth with them all along. They know it, but they just can’t see it.

Here we are introduced to a theme that is going to threaten some of you and with good reason. It is a kindness of God for you to be threatened. Some of you have been raised in the church. Like these scribes, you can answer many of the questions about the Bible. You can point to positions in the church that you have held, jobs that you have done, and

even goals that you have helped accomplish. My prayer, my concern is that while you may know about Jesus, that you do not really know Jesus. Religious people are generally the most difficult people to really embrace the gospel since it is so difficult for them to embrace the reality of their need.

2. **The Response** – (7-12)

The depths of Herod's blindness are revealed by the extent to which he is willing to go to deal with the threat of Christ.

A. Deceit, Fear and Cover-up

Herod brought the wise men in secretly. He does not want the news of the birth of the Messiah to get out. So, under the guise of wanting to know where the child is so that he can go and worship, he sends these men to do the investigation. It is a splendid plan, is it not? If he moves in with his spies and soldiers his true intentions will be immediately revealed. These wise men provide him with a perfect cloak. They can find where the child is and he can get rid of the threat. Of course here is the problem. These men really believe that this child is the king of the Jews. It is also obvious that they believe that there is something divine about the child since they have come all this way in order to worship the child. This is the last thing on Herod's mind. He is thinking murder, not worship. And, he is willing to pretend to worship so that he can get what he wants. This lie (v.7) reveals deep darkness in Herod's soul. His position of power blinds him to the Savior who has come to rescue him.

But, here is the reality. In order for Herod to be rescued from his own sin, Herod must be willing to give up his throne literally and spiritually. Herod would not do that. Now, notice this, because this is such an important truth. Herod has already showed his cards. He has already revealed what was in his heart when he (v.3) was terrified at the news of a king being born. And now (v.7) he is willing to lie, even to use the guise of worship as a cloak for murder. Do you see what is going on? Jesus has already revealed that Herod's idol, Herod's savior, Herod's trust and security was in his power, which is why he was terrified at the thought of losing it, and was willing to murder children in order to keep it. You know when someone is getting close to what you really treasure, when you lie to cover it up, and are willing to sin to keep from losing it. We cling tightly to things that we think will save us, even when those very things are destroying us. There is a better way.

B. Joy, Worship and Obedience

The wise men listened and went on their way. (9) Now, the star that they had seen moves. Does that mean that it had not moved before? I tend to think so, because it would help explain why these men ended up in Jerusalem. The star, it seemed was over Israel and since Jerusalem is the capital, going there would only make sense. But, now the star moves. Since Bethlehem is only 5 miles to the south of Jerusalem, it is rather fascinating to try to figure this out. There are a number of accounts of astronomers who have tried to say that it was some sort of comet or other celestial phenomena, but it is not only

speculative, it is distracting from the main point. And yet, the appearance of this star is no small matter, especially to men who have studied the stars for all of their lives and come from a line of astronomers and astrologers who have studied the stars for hundreds of years. Can you imagine the thrill of seeing a star for the first time, and then the realization that this star is in the heavens for the purpose of leading you to a king?

Here is my guess as to what happened. The wise men get to Jerusalem and discover that no one there knows anything about a king being born. If the star had not been moving, as the text seems to imply, then I imagine that these men were now wondering if they had made this entire trip in vain. What if they had misread the revelation? Travel time by camel is anywhere from 10-20 miles per day. Since Babylon to Jerusalem is about 500 miles direct, but 800 miles by the trade routes, it would have taken these men anywhere from 4 to 7 weeks, one-way. That is a long trip to take with guards and attendants to come up empty.

Did you hear about that lady from Belgium who was supposed to pick up a friend at a train station 90 miles away, but due to a faulty GPS and a serious case of not paying attention, this lady drove 900 miles in the wrong direction and ended up in Croatia, where she finally realized (after two days) that she was not in Belgium anymore. And Cathi thinks that men are too stubborn to stop and ask directions.

Seriously, to take a trip by caravan all the way from Babylon to Jerusalem and come up empty would be very frustrating so, you can imagine their relief and now the heightened sense of anticipation when upon leaving Jerusalem the star began to go ahead of them. Not only would this validate their trip, but what just happened in Jerusalem contrasted with the appearance now movement of a star would make it clear that they were some of the very few in the entire world who knew about this. They knew something of major significance was happening. Look at how these men responded! God revealed himself to them and they responded in faith. Their faith was revealed in how they followed and in their worship.

It is a shame that the Bible ruins so many traditions. The men made their way to Bethlehem, where they found the house (not a stable) and Joseph is not mentioned as being there. It is obvious that this is at least several months later perhaps even longer than a year. Joseph and Mary have stayed in Bethlehem, with Joseph, we can only assume, finding work as a carpenter to provide for their daily needs. So, there goes the manger scene. These men find Jesus, as a child and they fell down and worshiped him.

This is one of the stories that has suffered from familiarity. In other words, we have heard it so much, that when we hear it, we really don't hear it. Matthew describes a scene in v.11 that almost takes our breath away. Here are men laying on the ground before a child because they do not believe that they are worthy to stand in his presence. These men are wealthy. They are accomplished. They are learned. They are powerful. They come from a line of king-makers from regions that have known world power. They know protocol, and yet, here they are, in all of their regality laying on the ground before a child. Not only do you have men worshiping a boy, but this boy and his mom are poor. These men, as we

see in a minute, were rich and yet, they humbled themselves as much as is humanly possible before this poor little boy and his mother. (Note: they did not worship Mary, they worshiped the child.) How long they were on the ground, what they said, prayed, or other details are not mentioned.

What was it that drew these men who to leave their lives in Persia and come to lowly Bethlehem? They were seeking Jesus. Those who seek him, find him. And when they found him they laid their lives before him and gave him gifts. It is true that gold was known to be the gift for kings, and that incense was an expression of devotion and myrrh was associated with embalming. Matthew does not say anything about the significance of the gifts, though it is clear that their value would be needed to pay for the unexpected trip to Egypt that Joseph, Mary and Jesus were about to take.

Our text ends with the statement that these men were warned not to go back and tell Herod what they had found. You could say, that after they met Jesus, their plans were changed. He has that effect on all who really encounter him.