

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 26, 2010)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Christmas Follow-Up: The Power of the Baby

(Matthew 2:1-18)

Introduction: About babies...

At this season of the year, we celebrate the truth of the Christmas story. The good news that Christmas announces is that God has come to dwell with us.

That is what “Immanuel” means. Two thousand years ago, God dwelt with us in the Person of Jesus Christ.

There are many aspects of the Christmas story that are startling. There is the virgin birth. There is the star that led the wise men. There are the angels who appeared to the shepherds in their fields.

All of these differing aspects of Christmas - and more besides - fill us with awe and wonder at what God has done in the miracle of Christmas.

But, of all the astounding aspects of Christmas, surely one of the most astounding for people of all ages all through the ages has been this: that when Christ, the Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world came, He came as a baby.

He didn't come as a conquering king. God determined to reveal Himself as a baby.

Now, before we go any farther today, let me just make a comment or two about babies, generally.

Personally, I think babies are great. I know many of you think the same thing. And, we are not alone in that opinion.

I was first drawn to babies when we first had them in our home. Grandparenting has done nothing but increase my love and appreciation for babies.

And, loving babies as I do, I'm glad to find myself in good company. According to Scripture, one of the greatest fans of babies just happens to be God Himself.

In Matthew 18:1-14, Jesus answered one of the disciples' questions (“*Who is the greatest among us?*”) by placing a little child in their midst (Mark even tells us that Jesus took the little child in His arms...). He went on to say, [18:4] “*Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*”

According to Jesus, babies teach us **how to enter the Kingdom of God** (with contended trust), **how to find true greatness** (by means of humility), and **how to welcome Jesus Himself** (with praise).

Jesus wants us to know that babies are Very Important People. Babies are powerful. Really!

A baby has the ability to attract attention and to become the most important person in any room. He or she can do this equally well by being especially cute or by being especially unhappy.

A baby can serve as a wonderful conversation starter. Babies can break down barriers of shyness and sadness. Babies will cause complete strangers to act in ways and to speak in ways they would never dream of if the baby weren't there.

Babies really are powerful creatures.

At the same time, babies are pretty helpless, vulnerable, and dependent. They can't do much besides feed, scream, burp, sleep, and go.

So, my thesis for this morning is this:

A BABY IS VERY POWERFUL IN ITS POWERLESSNESS.

It is easy to opt for hyperbole when it comes to our faith. I have been known to dabble in hyperbole myself from time to time. But we wouldn't ever want to say that Jesus burst onto the scene of human history. He didn't "burst." He was born, plain and simple.

Yet despite His humble birth and the weakness of His babyhood, He wielded great power from the very beginning.

His power was seen in the way various people reacted to His arrival. The first class of people we will observe are the wise men from the east - the *magi*.

A Search for Jesus... (vv. 1-8)

...By the Magi (vv. 1-2)

The "who's" and "what's" of the Magi

As it is used in Matthew chapter 2, the term *magi* refers to men who made up the official priesthood of the Parthian Empire.¹ Sometimes called simply "wise men" they were the soothsayers, *magicians*, and astrologers of Parthia, a Kingdom to the east of Israel.²

These first century *magi* were the descendants of the *magicians* and sorcerers over whom the prophet Daniel ruled when he lived in Persia under Darius the Mede six hundred years earlier.³

There were some things about the *magi* that were commendable (they were essentially monotheistic in their world view), but no one will deny that they practiced many pagan rituals in their worship system.

By the turn of the first century, the function of the *magi* in the Parthian Empire had evolved from a purely religious one (sorcerer, court magician, royal astrologer) to a religious/political mix.

And one of the defining jobs of the *magi* was to select, utilizing astrology and astronomy, the king who would sit on the Parthian throne.

When we turn to Matthew 2 we read that some of these *magi* "king-makers" have made their way from Parthia to Palestine, the land of the Jews.

[1] Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.⁴

Because of the gifts mentioned later in the passage, we usually assume that there were three *magi*, but Scripture doesn't tell us how many *magi* arrived in Jerusalem.⁵

The only thing Matthew mentions is that the *magi* came from the east to Israel, and that they came after Jesus' birth.

So, what brought these politically powerful Parthian king-makers to Jerusalem?

The "why" of the Magi's travels (v. 2)

[2] "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

⁴ One author describes the arrival of the *magi* on the scene in this way, "In Jerusalem the sudden appearance of the *Magi*, probably traveling in force with all imaginable oriental pomp, and accompanied by adequate cavalry escort to insure their safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem, as is recorded by Matthew. It would seem as if these *Magi* were attempting to perpetrate a border incident which could bring swift reprisal from Parthian armies. Their request of Herod regarding him who "***has been born king of the Jews***" was a calculated insult to him who had contrived and bribed his way into that office." Such a description helps us to understand why this power-loving king was troubled at the news of the *magi*.

⁵ In fact, church tradition assigns to the *magi* the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. But that is assumption built on assumption.

¹ The *magi* received their priesthood by inheritance, as did the priests of the Jews.

² The powerful Parthian Empire from which the *magi* came was located to the east of the farthest reach of the Roman Empire (south and east of the Caspian Sea near ancient Mesopotamia).

³ Do we wonder why pagan *magi* such as those we find here in Matthew 2 might have been studying the Hebrew Scriptures? More than likely, they had first had exposure to them through the life and ministry of Daniel.

The *magi* had been led through their studies of the constellations - and one exceptional star in particular - to expect a Jewish king to be born near the city of Jerusalem.

They have come to worship Him. They were more than curiosity seekers - and the song is right. These wise men really did "travel afar" - hundreds of miles, in fact! - to find the king of the Jews.

Now, we are going to leave the *magi* for a moment, but we will come back to them again shortly.

Immediately after the mention of the *magi* we are introduced to another individual - not a group, but one man - who had quite a different response to the news of a newborn King of Israel. His name is Herod.

...By Herod (vv. 3-8)

*Herod - and his reign*⁷

This Herod (there were several), known as Herod the Great, was the Roman backed king of the Jewish people. He reigned as king from 40 BC until shortly after the birth of Jesus (around 4 AD).

Herod was a wealthy, politically gifted, very skilled administrator.

He oversaw the construction of the magnificent Herodian Temple in Jerusalem along with many other building projects. Early in his reign, he handled a severe famine that had hit Israel admirably.

But, above all, Herod the Great loved power. History's record tells us that he was notorious for paranoia and cruelty.

⁶ One of the fascinating little details of Matthew's Gospel is that the phrase "***The King of the Jews***" is found only here in this passage on the lips of the pagan *magi*, and then again at the end of His life as a Roman accusation on the upright of the cross on which He was killed. In fact, most of the times in Scripture where Jesus is referred to as the King of the Jews, it is spoken in derision (Mk. 15:2, 9,12,18,26; Luke 23:3,37-38; John 18:33,39; 19:3,19,21).

⁷ There are several "Herods" mentioned in the New Testament. The Herod mentioned in this passage is the first of the so-called Herodian dynasty.

He had two of his own sons killed (Alexander and Aristobulus) because he was suspicious that they were trying to usurp his throne (prompting Caesar Augustus to remark, "*It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.*")

He killed his wife, several close associates, and many others along the way, and all for the same reason. He was obsessed with the idea that someone, anyone, would take away his personal sovereignty.

So here come the *magi* rolling into town. When they stood before Herod they told him the reason for their visit.

And they must have known the effect that their inflammatory words would have had on Herod. Speaking to the APPOINTED king of the Jews, they made reference to "***Him who is BORN King of the Jews.***"⁸

The BORN king always will replace the appointed king. So, do we imagine that Herod was thrilled at the news that the rightful King of the Jews had been born?

Hardly! The *magi*'s announcement went over like a lead balloon.

Herod - and the Baby Jesus (vv. 3-8)

A very troubled Herod (v. 3)

[3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

And why was he troubled? It was because he knew that his power base was in jeopardy. The Baby King was a threat.

It's similar to what can happen in a family when a second child is born.

⁸ The Parthians were not ruled by the Romans, but were rivals to the Romans. The two powers were continually engaging in border skirmishes with the outlying areas. One of those outlying regions was the Roman political state of Syria which just happened to contain Palestine (Israel).

The world no longer revolves around the alpha child. The new noisemaker has usurped the position of pre-eminence and jealousy can arise.

In King Herod's mind, the world revolved around him - and he couldn't begin to imagine a world with a new sovereign.⁹

Well, Herod had not risen to the position of king by being passive. He was a man of action. So, he quickly put in place a plan of action to deal with this troubling news.

First, he had to find out where the Messiah king would be born.

Herod's discovery (vv. 4-6)

[4] Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Here is an oddity.

Even though he was the king of the nation of Israel, Herod was not familiar enough with the Hebrew Scriptures to have known that the Messiah was to be born in the city of David, Bethlehem.

So, he called in the religious leaders of the day who did know. And sure enough, they were able to pinpoint the Messiah's birthplace.

[5] They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: [6] 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"

⁹ It may appear that Herod's rejection of Jesus and his attempts to kill Him were not so much of a rebellion against God as they were a fleshly hanging on to power; that they were not so much a spiritual battle over Jesus' Lordship as a political power struggle. But, the spiritual battles of life rarely jump out at us and say, "I am Satan. Choose me." Rather, there is usually a subtlety to the opposition against us. We may recognize power struggles as spiritual battles, or not. But they are, nevertheless, essentially spiritual.

After learning that Bethlehem was to be the Messiah's birthplace, the king called the *magi* who had come from Parthia into a closed chamber meeting, to find out when they had first seen the guiding star.

Herod's commission (vv. 7-8)

[7] Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. [8] And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him."

If he could just find out when the star first appeared, he would know how old his rival was.

With what the *magi* told him, he now knows that the child is at least several months old, since it would have taken the *magi* that long to have traveled to Jerusalem.

He dismissed the *magi* with marching orders, telling them to keep on searching for the Child, and ending with, "Oh, and by the way. When you find Him, report to me, so that I, too, may come and worship Him."

He would have the chief priests, and the *magi*, and us believe that He wanted to join the *magi* for a worship service. But, as we will soon see, his real intent was far more sinister.

This morning we are primarily focusing on Herod and the *magi*. But for just a moment I want to direct your attention to a third group that surfaces in this passage.

This is the group of the chief priests and the scribes, the men to whom Herod had gone for an answer to his Bible question.

...By the Religious Rulers

The chief priests and the scribes were the religious elite of ancient Israel. They knew the Old Testament Scriptures backwards and forwards. After all, it was their job to know it and to teach it.

They knew all about the national expectations for a Messiah. And presumably, they were looking forward to the birth of the Messiah, themselves.

But, as we examine Matthew's account what is striking is how little they were impacted either by the arrival of the *magi* or of the news they brought.

I can't believe that it was an everyday occurrence for *magi* from the orient to arrive in Jerusalem - yet these chief priests and scribes didn't seem at all interested in them being there.

It certainly wasn't every day that **Herod** asked for help in determining the Messiah's birthplace - but these religious rulers did nothing more than answer his question and then continue on with life - *status quo*.

If there had been the faintest possibility that the Messiah had actually been born, these guys should they have been up and gone in a heartbeat to Bethlehem to find out if the reports were true.

But they didn't even travel to Bethlehem to check it out - and that is an amazing display of spiritual apathy. Hold on to that thought. We'll come back to it in a couple of minutes.

For now, though, let's pick up the activities of the *magi* again. They left Jerusalem and Herod to find the Child, and were led to Jesus by the star that had originally tipped them off, back home in Parthia.

The Response to Jesus... (vv. 9-18)

...By the Magi (vv. 9-11)

The Magi followed the star to Jesus (vv. 9-10)

[9] After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

After only a short while, they found themselves in Bethlehem, at the home of Jesus.

The Magi found Jesus (v. 11)

In the home of Jesus (v. 11a)

[11a] And coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother...

It is critically important that we note that the word used to describe Jesus here (*child*; Greek - *paidios*) is not the same as the word for a newborn infant (Greek - *brephos*). Jesus is at least several months old at this point, perhaps as old as two years.

Some undefined period of time has elapsed between the time that the shepherds saw Jesus lying in a manger on the night of His birth (Luke 2), and now, when the wise men saw Him in a home.

Yes, it is true.

The *magi* never did appear at Bethlehem's stables. So the manger scenes we have seen all our lives, and which dot our neighborhoods showing the wise men present with the animals are wrong. (sorry if that messes with your mind...)

But here, in a home somewhere in Bethlehem, there is this tranquil scene of Jesus with His mother, Mary. The *magi* have finally found the King they sought!

At the feet of Jesus

[11b]...and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him...

If we try to picture this scene, it might make us feel a bit uneasy. Here are grown men, powerful political figures from a foreign culture, prostrate on the ground in front of a Toddler.

It almost seems sacrilegious - and indeed it is idolatrous - if the Baby is not who we claim He is. If Jesus is God in the flesh, it makes perfect sense that *magi* - or you or any of us - would fall to the ground and worship Him.

After bowing before the Infant King, the *magi* gave Him the gifts they had brought with them.

Christmas gift-giving, 101 (v. 11c)

[11c]...They, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

- They gave Him gold, the universal standard currency, a valuable commodity in any culture.
- They gave Him frankincense, a fragrant perfume.
- They presented Him with myrrh, an aromatic balm, derived from the resin of a plant that grows in Arabia.¹⁰

And, with the giving of the gifts, the worship service for which they had traveled all this distance was over.

From this point forward the Bible tells us that the *magi* did not go back to Parthia through Jerusalem to report to Herod Jesus' location.

No. For ***[12]...having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.***

And after the *magi* left, God also gave Joseph a message in a dream.

...By King Herod (vv. 12-18)

The first family, off to Egypt (vv. 13-15)

[13] Now when they (i.e. - the magi) had gone, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." [14] So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt.

[15] He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON."

Well, when Herod learned that the *magi* had departed, he went positively berserk.

Herod slays the innocents (vv. 16-18)

[16] Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. [17] Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: [18] "A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE."

History tells us that King Herod died shortly after committing this atrocity.

At earlier periods in his life, there were actions he took which resulted in greater numbers of people being killed than were killed here in the slaughter of the innocent babies.

We know that on at least one occasion, he killed 3,000 people in a fit of suspicious malice, many more than were killed in Matthew 2.

However, for sheer, unadulterated paranoia and hateful power-mongering, this is as bad as it gets.

¹⁰ Myrrh, was one of the spices used in the embalming process, and was no doubt used to embalm Jesus. The irony of an element of His embalming being one of His presents here has frequently been noted.

Herod is the ultimate example of the ruthless hunger for power run amuck. Herod is the epitome of the spirit that refuses at all costs to submit to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Conclusion:

Now on this Sunday morning following our celebration of the birth of Jesus, we have not focused on the birth of Jesus or even on the events surrounding His birth. We have looked at the responses (or non-responses) of religious rulers, a king, and *magi* from the east to the arrival of Jesus.

And now it comes to us to ask what we can learn from the record of Scripture today? How will we be encouraged to a life of faith by what we have seen?

Let's first pull out a mirror and see if we see in our reflection any of the spirit of the first century religious rulers.

Lessons learned from religious rulers

Matthew purposefully contrasts the enthusiastic and costly adoration of the *magi*, with the sheer apathy of the Jewish rulers.

Their refusal to travel a few miles to come to the baby Jesus was prophetic of the personal journey which they refused to make in order to come to Jesus, the mature man, some thirty years later.

These guys paid no attention to the possible birth of the long-awaited Messiah.

Is it possible that we might cop a similar attitude to God and to the things of God today? Absolutely.

We hear the news that Christ is born, has died for our sins, and has risen again that we might have life. And we either allow the Holy Spirit to use that news to transform us OR we react with a yawn and carry on as

before, like the chief priests, never allowing life-changing truth to change our lives. We settle for *status quo*.

Friends, may God deliver us from an apathetic spirit this year. May He enlarge our hearts to seek Him and draw near to Him.

Next, let's look at Herod.

Lessons learned from Herod the Great

Herod serves as a gruesome reminder of the dangers of holding tightly to the reins of personal sovereignty.

The king of Israel was committed to advancing himself and his own power, so the arrival of the rightful King only served to prompt him to stiffen his neck and try to overthrow the true Sovereign.

As much as we might wish it were otherwise, the story of Herod the Great is the story of the 21st century as much as it is of the 1st.

The story of Herod is the story of any person who loves control and finds even the rumored proximity of any other King intolerable.

So, can each of us ask ourselves this morning, honestly - "*Who reigns over the kingdom of my life?*"

Jesus is the King. Kings reign. Does King Jesus reign over your life? What a dynamite opportunity this morning affords each of us to find deliverance from the power-hungry spirit of Herod. Today can easily and joyfully be the day that you and I do what Herod refused to do and submit to the reign of King Jesus.

Finally, let's look to the *magi* and see what we might learn about recognizing and welcoming Jesus.

Lessons learned from ancient magi

The *magi* were powerful men, but they knew a greater power when they saw one. They were great men, but they understood that true greatness consists of serving a great Master.

And they were so filled with enthusiasm by the signs God gave them that they took a long, arduous, costly journey to worship the new king.

As soon as they entered the home of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, they threw decorum to the wind, and in an act of total un-self-consciousness, fell down to worship the Child Jesus.

Today ,it is the pagan *magi* who serve as our worship role models. This day, may God move us to respond to the power of the Baby born in Bethlehem the same way they did.

This day, we celebrate *the power of the baby*.