

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(December 29, 2019)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Christmas #4**

### **The Very Disruptive Jesus**

(Matthew 2:1-18)

#### **Introduction: The set of the sail...**

Before Kathy and I owned a sailboat, I knew nothing about boating lingo, backing a trailer, lake culture, or - most relevantly - actually sailing anything.

But when we bought our Sunfish sailboat many years ago (we have since sold it), I learned a few things.

I embarrassed myself into learning how to back a boat trailer into the water while strangers laughed themselves silly. I learned rudimentary nautical terms to throw out to the friendly “lake people.” And I learned the most basic things about sailing.

For instance, I learned that I could sail in any direction on Medina Lake I wanted to go, regardless of the wind’s direction.

It was easy if I wanted to go in line with where the wind was blowing. I just let the sail stream out to the side. It’s called “running” with the win and it is a rush.

I learned that it’s also possible to sail into the wind, but that’s harder. I was never very good at what is called *tacking*.

But, by moving the sail back and forth - changing the “set” of the sail - and moving in a zigzag pattern (tacking), you can sail into a headwind, which I successfully did a few times.

As long as it isn’t too strong, the wind isn’t bad or good. The wind just “is”. And the key to successful sailing is to “set” the sail to catch the wind correctly for where you want to go.

Or, as the poem puts it:

*One ship sails East,  
And another West,  
By the self-same winds that blow,  
'Tis the set of the sails  
And not the gales,  
That tells the way we go.<sup>1</sup>*

Winds - in the form of life events - come to us all. Depending on the set of our life’s sail, these winds will blow us this way or that.

- A promotion with a raise prompts increased generosity in one person while someone else goes on a buying spree.
- A compliment sparks pride in me and gratitude in you.
- A well-meaning rebuke can result in resentment or repentance.
- A devastating reversal will lead this person to deeply trust in God and another to abandon faith altogether.

These winds - either delightful or disruptive - are unavoidable. How we respond, though, is up to us. And what determines how we respond to the winds and the storms and the earthquakes life throws at us is the “set” of our life’s sail.

Today, we’re going to see one individual and two groups of people who experienced the exact same wind and responded in profoundly different ways.

They encountered Jesus. And because their sails were each *set* to a different angle, running into Him sent each one running in a different direction.

First, we’ll look at the response of King Herod to Jesus. Herod wanted to kill Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> “’Tis The Set Of The Sail”, by Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

## HEROD (Matthew 2:1-4,7-8, 16-18)

### Herod the Great

There are several members of the Herodian family mentioned in the Bible. This Herod is the one known to us as Herod the Great. At the time of Jesus' birth, he was the Roman-backed king of the Jews.

Born in 73 BC, he reigned as king from 40 BC until a few years after Jesus' birth. In many ways, he was a successful ruler. He was politically gifted and was an excellent administrator.

Herod was responsible for the re-building project at the temple in Jerusalem and he undertook many other major building projects at various places in Palestine.

### Herod the Terrible

But, above all, Herod the Great loved power.

He held tenaciously to his power. And power's intoxicating influence soured everything about him. Herod was famous for cruelty, suspicion, and resentfulness.

He had two of his own sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, killed because he was suspicious that they were trying to usurp his throne before his death.<sup>2</sup>

He killed his wife, several close associates, and many others along the way, for the same reason. He was paranoid that anyone would take away his personal sovereignty and destroy his power.

So, when magi from the east told Herod that one who had been born "**King of the Jews**" was in the vicinity, he knew what he had to do.

Because the *born* king will always replace the *appointed* king, Herod understood that his rule was in jeopardy. So, he did the only thing that made sense to him. He put in place a plan to kill Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> This act prompted Caesar Augustus to remark, "*I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son.*"

## Herod and Jesus

King Herod was terrified when he heard about Jesus' birth because he viewed even the young Jesus as a threat to His power.<sup>3</sup>

So, Herod started asking around to find out where this **[Matthew 2:2] "King of the Jews"** was to have been born.<sup>4</sup>

When he discovered that the prophets (Micha 5:2) said that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, he sent these magi to find the Child so that he, too, could worship Him. (Matthew 2: 8)

Of course, that was just a ploy to find Jesus. Herod wanted to know where the child was so that he could put an end to Him.

And when God revealed to the magi what the mad king really wanted to do, they did NOT go back to Herod, but traveled back home to Persia by another route.

The Bible tells us what Herod did when he found out that he had been deceived.

### Herod's Slaughter (2:16)

***[Matthew 2:16] 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.***

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<sup>3</sup> One author (I was not able to find the source) describes the arrival of the *magi*, "In Jerusalem the sudden appearance of the Magi, probably traveling in force with all imaginable oriental pomp, and accompanied by adequate cavalry escort to ensure their [safety], certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem...It would almost seem that these Magi were attempting to perpetrate a border incident which could bring swift reprisal from Parthian armies. [Further], their request of Herod regarding him who "**has been born King of the Jews**" was a calculated insult to him (i.e. Herod) who had contrived and bribed his way into that office." This helps us see why Herod was troubled at the news of the Magi's arrival.

<sup>4</sup> Herod's biblical illiteracy is, to say the least, inappropriate for Israel's king.

At earlier periods in his life, Herod took actions that resulted in far greater numbers of people being killed than were killed here in what we refer to as “*the slaughter of the innocents.*”

For instance, we know that at least on one occasion, he killed three thousand people in a fit of suspicious malice, many more than were killed in his attempt to kill Jesus.

But for sheer cruelty and for ugly power-mongering, this is as bad as it gets. Herod the Great is the ultimate example of the unbridled desire for power and of the corrupting power of power.

And today, he represents the spirit that refuses at all costs to submit to the sovereignty of any lord but Self. Hold on to that thought as we look at another response to the disruptive presence of Jesus.

The religious leaders of the day, Pharisees and Sadducees and Chief Priests, weren't at all like Herod. They didn't want to kill Jesus.

They didn't really want to have much to do with Him at all.

## **RELIGIOUS RULERS (2:5-6)**

### **The Role of the Religious Rulers**

The chief priests and the scribes represented national pride, purity, and propriety. They were the religious elite of ancient Israel.

They knew the Old Testament really, really well. It was their job to know it and to teach it.

That means that they knew all about what the Bible taught about the Messiah. Unlike Herod, they knew where Messiah would be born and lots of other stuff that the Old Testament foretold about the Messiah.

### **The Response of the Religious Rulers**

But, when they heard from Herod that it was possible that the Messiah had been born, they didn't respond with anything like enthusiasm or passion or even mild curiosity.

We might have thought that they would have rushed to Bethlehem to find out if Herod's intel was correct. But no.

They sat still. They never even walked to the nearby village of Bethlehem to check it out. Color them apathetic, indifferent, cold.

So, Herod, the man appointed to be King of the Jews wanted Jesus dead and the religious elites couldn't have cared less and didn't even check out the rumors of the birth of the Messiah.

We now watch the response of pagan wise men from the east to the presence of Jesus.

## **MAGI (2:1-2, 7-12)**

### **Clarity on What Is a “Magi”**

#### *Parthian wise men*

We know these wise men as *magi*. The term refers to a caste of men who made up the priesthood of the ancient Parthian Empire.<sup>5</sup>

They were the magicians and astrologers of Parthia and were the descendants of the sorcerers over whom the prophet Daniel ruled when he served Darius the Mede six hundred years earlier.<sup>6</sup>

The powerful Parthian Empire from which these magi came, was located east of the farthest reach of the Roman Empire (south and east of the Caspian Sea near ancient Mesopotamia). So, Parthia wasn't under Roman rule. Parthia was a rival empire to Rome.

There were constant border skirmishes between Rome and Parthia. The main area where these skirmishes took place was in the Roman state of Syria, the state that contained Palestine (Israel).

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<sup>5</sup> The magi received their priesthood by inheritance, as did the priests of the Jews. And, while they did hold to some occult and pagan practices, including magical rituals, they were essentially monotheistic.

<sup>6</sup> Do we wonder why pagan magi such as those we find here in Matthew 2 might have been studying the Hebrew Scriptures? It is likely that they had first gotten exposure to them through the life and ministry of Daniel.

So, politically and militarily speaking, there was no love lost between the Parthians and the Romans.

### *Parthian king-makers*

By the turn of the first century, the function of the magi in the Parthian Empire had evolved from a purely religious role - court magician, royal astrologer - to a powerful political role.

At the time of Jesus' birth, one of the defining roles of the magi was to select (by both astrology and their own wisdom) the king who would sit on the Parthian throne.

And, with all that as background, we turn to Matthew's Gospel and find that some of these wise men / magi / king-makers had made their way to Palestine.

***[Matthew 2:1] Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem...***

Because of the gifts mentioned later in the passage, it is often assumed that there were three magi, but the Bible doesn't tell us how many magi there were.

The only thing Matthew mentions is that the magi came from the east to Israel, and that they came *after* Jesus' birth.<sup>7</sup>

So, what brought these politically powerful oriental magi to Jerusalem? The question they ask tells us.

### **The Reason for the Magi's Journey to Jerusalem (v. 2)**

***[2:2] "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?<sup>8</sup> For we saw His star<sup>9</sup> in the east and have come to worship Him."***

<sup>7</sup> There may have been two years between Jesus' birth and the visit of the magi.

<sup>8</sup> The title, "***King of the Jews***" is found 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. Most of the time, when Jesus is referred to as the

Through their observations of stars, comets, planets<sup>10</sup> and constellations these magi had been led to understand that a new Jewish king had been born in Israel, near the city of Jerusalem.

And they weren't just paparazzi-like curiosity seekers. They had an interest in all things Jewish. (That interest is probably due to the lasting influence of their ancestors' time with the prophet Daniel.)

I love the irony here. They had made their way to Jerusalem and were standing before King Herod - whom they likely despised - to pay homage to the King of the Jews.<sup>11</sup>

After this brief, awkward encounter with Herod, the magi left the *appointed* king to find the *born* KING.

### **The Magi with Jesus (vv. 9-11)**

*Onward to Bethlehem! (v. 9)*

***[Matthew 2:9] 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.***

The magi had been searching for Israel's king for a long time.

They had first noticed the signs of the coming birth of Israel's king years earlier. They had left Parthia a year or more before arriving in Judea.

And following the short trip (3-4 hours) to Bethlehem, they found themselves with the King they had sought.

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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).

<sup>9</sup> While searching, I found the following explanations of what the "star" might have been: (a). a supernova; (b). a comet; (c). a massing of planets; (d). a meeting of Jupiter and Regulus; (e). the conjunction of Jupiter and Venus; (f). a re-appearance of the Old Testament pillar of fire.

<sup>10</sup> Planets were known as "wanderers" (planew - Greek, to wander or deceive).

<sup>11</sup> They may even have gone to Palestine in hopes of installing this new King.

*They found Jesus*

***[Matthew 2:10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. [11a] After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother...***

The Greek word that is used to describe Jesus here (*child*; Greek - *paidios*) is not the same word that is used to describe a newborn or an infant (Greek - *brephos*).

So, 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 ***“the house.”***

Given the time it took to make the journey from Parthia to Palestine, if the magi left when they saw the star announcing the birth, Jesus may have well been as old as two when they arrived.

So, yes, it is true. The magi did NOT appear at the Bethlehem stables and they didn't see Jesus lying in a manger.

So, the manger scenes we have seen all our lives - and which we have in our church lobby!! - which show the wise men at the stables, are all wrong.

However, here, in a home somewhere in Bethlehem, in a scene with the Baby and His mother, Mary, the magi have finally found the King they have sought.

Watch them as they see Jesus for the first time.

*They worshipped Jesus*

***[Matthew 2:11b] ...and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him.***

They lost themselves in adoration of this Toddler.

Picture this scene and you just might feel a bit uneasy. Here are grown men, powerful political figures from a far-distant culture, prostrate on the ground in front of a two-year-old.

It almost seems sacrilegious - and it is *idolatrous* - unless this Child is who we believe He is. If we are correct that Jesus is King, Messiah, Son of God, bowing before Him makes perfect sense.

After they bowed before the young Jesus, the *magi* gave Him the gifts they had brought with them.

*They gave gifts to Jesus*

***[Matthew 2:11] ... Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold*** (the universal standard currency), ***frankincense*** (a fragrant perfume), ***and myrrh*** (an aromatic balm).<sup>12</sup>

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

### **Conclusion:**

We have anticipated the birth of Jesus throughout December and celebrated it last Sunday and on Christmas Eve. So, this morning we are not focusing on Jesus' birth or on the events surrounding the birth.

We're zeroing in on the way some of the first people who were confronted by the reality of Jesus responded.

There were three, very distinct but divergent responses: a sharp sword and a cold heart and a bent knee.

*A sharp sword*

King Herod the Great was troubled when he heard news that the King of the Jews had been born. He was troubled because he knew that this Child King threatened his throne.

And Herod serves as a gruesome reminder of the danger of power.

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<sup>12</sup> Foreshadowing His death, myrrh was a spice used in the embalming process. It may well have been used to embalm Jesus.

### Speaking pragmatically...

From a strictly pragmatic standpoint, the way Herod behaved toward Jesus - the threat to his reign - serves as a warning to every person in power, at whatever level, in whatever realm.

The will to power is strong. The last thing most city council members or state legislators want is term limits. Once power is gained, most people would rather retain it. Many will fight to keep it.

But all earthly power is derived. No power any of us might ever wield is intrinsic to us. Our power (authority, influence, control, dominance) is always subject to reversal and loss.

If you have a position of power at work, you could be demoted or fired, your position could be eliminated, your company could go under. It's true for those in power in a job, in government, or at church.

Herod never came to grips with any of that. Today, you and I can watch Herod and learn.

The best possible thing to do with any power that comes your way is to hold it with an open hand. Don't cling to it. There is always a flight risk to power. And when power is fleeing from you, the desire to keep it may tempt you to a murderous, Herodian response.

You could be tempted to do damage to others just to keep your power. That's ugly and it's not fitting for a follower of Jesus.

Watch Him. When what little earthly power He had was gone, He kept His hand open, always **[1 Peter 2:23] entrusting Himself to [God] who judges righteously...** Jesus showed us that it is better to let go of power than to fight for it.

### Speaking personally...

More personally, Herod warns us against the danger of holding on to the reins of personal sovereignty.

Herod never came to grips with the fleeting nature of power OR with the idea that no human is made for sovereignty. Sovereignty is not our destiny.

Every created thing is made for a purpose.

A shovel is never happier than when it's digging a hole. Glue loves to bind things together. A hammer is delighted to bash in nails.

Every one of us creations of God is made to lead a life of purpose - but to what end? What is your purpose?

It's inspiring when we hear someone identify their life's purpose. But, in the words of Pastor Andy Stanley, this whole idea of *purpose* has a catch.

Everything that has a purpose is a *means* to an *end*.

We don't keep a shovel around just because we want to have a shovel. We keep it because it works better than anything else when we need to dig a hole. That shovel is a *means* to an *end*.

If I'm embracing a life of purpose, it means that I am saying, "*I am the MEANS to some greater END.*" I am not the *end* for which I exist.

King Herod saw himself as the *end* for which others were the *means*. But if you live like Herod, devoting yourself to yourself, at the end, all you'll have to show for yourself is yourself.

You and I were not made for sovereignty. We were designed by a Sovereign God to be the *means* to His *ends*.

Herod's story tells us that the throne belongs to Another, not to King Self. The very best way to live, the way of meaning and purpose, is to bow in submission to the One who sits on the throne. That would be Jesus.

The Child encountered by Herod grew to be a Man who would suffer and die and rise again. He is the Lord. He calls us each, right now, to submit to His loving Lordship.

That's Herod. Then, there were the religious rulers.

### *A cold heart*

#### Watching the religious elite...

It is hard for me to believe that it was an everyday occurrence for magi from the orient to arrive in Jerusalem.

I would think that it would have been a big deal. But when these magi rolled into town, the chief priests and scribes didn't seem at all interested in them being there.

It *certainly* wouldn't have been a common occurrence for Herod to ask them a Bible question like, "*Where will the Messiah be born?*"

When he asked, though, they showed a remarkable lack of curiosity. They didn't ask, "*What do you want to know THAT for?*" They didn't commend him for his biblical interest. They simply gave him his answer and continued with life. Their *status? Quo.*

If there had been the remotest possibility that the Messiah was just down the road in Bethlehem, wouldn't you think that these holy men ought to have been up and gone to see for themselves?

Instead, they just sat there. They never bothering to travel the short (6-10 miles) distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem to find out if Messiah, their Savior (!), had been born.

Their response gives us an amazing picture of sheer cold-hearted, indifferent, apathy.

Here, they refused to travel a few miles to see the Child Jesus. Thirty years later, they would refuse to come to the grown Jesus who offered them eternal life.

Here, they simply ignored Him; there, they conspired to have Him killed. It looks to me like the journey that ends with outright rejection begins with unchecked apathy.

These first-century religious people have a message for us who come to church in 2019-20.

#### Learning from the religious elite...

They tell us, "*Be careful. Guard your hearts. Beware the dangers that plague those who traffic in familiar truth.*"

You and I are susceptible to lukewarmth and apathy and what the Old Testament prophet Zephaniah called a, **[1:12] stagnant spirit.**

To guard against a "**stagnant spirit**", do what the Bible so often calls us to do. Remember.

Call to mind the greatness and the goodness of God. Remember the foundation stones of your faith.

- You believe things about God the Father that, if true, change everything. You believe that Almighty God is there, that He is good, that He is for you.
- You make the most audacious claims about Jesus. You believe that He was God in the flesh. You believe that He died for you on the cross and rose from the dead to bring you life.
- You believe that the Holy Spirit indwells you. You hold to the teaching that the Spirit of God will never leave you. You really believe that He empowers you to serve God as you trust Him.
- You believe that you - who don't deserve an eternity with God and could never pay God for what eternity is worth - receive that eternal life from God as a gift when you believe in Jesus.

If you **THINK** on these things, you'll escape spiritual apathy. If you **MEDITATE** on what is true, you'll be delivered from lukewarmth. If you **ACT** on the realities you believe, you can leave behind that "**stagnant spirit**" and lead a life of spiritual passion, fueled by the rivers of living water Jesus provides.

And finally, we turn to the Magi.

*A bent knee*

These wise men were not insignificant men. They were the politically powerful king-makers of the Parthian Empire.

They traveled thousands of miles to find a King worthy of their worship. They gladly gave that worship when they found Him, because they understood that true wisdom knows where to place its allegiance.

These men understood that true greatness doesn't depend on how great a master we are, but on how great our master is. They bowed low before the true King.

Isn't it funny that the characters we've seen this morning who are most worth imitating are pagan magi?

They came into Jesus' presence with gifts. They forgot decorum and in an act of total un-self-consciousness, did what you do in the presence of royalty. They bowed - before a two-year-old.

What is the set of your sail this morning?

*The "set" of your sail*

When Jesus' wind hit Herod's sail, it sent him to self-protection and violence against anyone who would threaten his personal sovereignty.

Jesus' wind hit the religious elite's sails and sent them to the doldrums of apathy.

But when His wind hit the sails of the magi, they "ran" with His wind. It drove them to worship.

Take care to set the sail of your life to catch Jesus' wind for the ride of your life.