

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Merry Christmas!

Joy to the World!

(Matthew 2)

Study #3

Introduction: The BEST of all possible governments...

In this season, and for lots of obvious reasons, lots of us are thinking about...government.

Of course, we're thinking about Christmas. That's why we're here today.

But government and politics and ruling power are also on our minds. There's a lot of discussion these days about the shape and the workings of our government. We wonder, *"What's the best way for a government to function, given the challenges we face?"*

We credit Winston Churchill with the line, *"Democracy is the worst form of government - except for all the other forms of government that have been tried."*

Over time, humanity has tried out all sorts of governmental models. Most of them are put together with the best of intentions.

But, sadly, over time, they all fail. And the failure of human government is inevitable because of human sin.

Whether we are talking about democracy or socialism, fascism or communism, or any of the various kinds of authoritarian regimes, they all fail...because the people leading those governments are, without exception, sinners.

But even if it is doomed to failure, government is necessary because the worst possible state for a society is *anarchy* (the word means "no ruler"). Nobody wins when nobody is in charge.

So, we search for the best possible system among a host of flawed possibilities.

For me, given the reality of human sin, I am a big fan of the checks and balances of our democratic republic.

But if push came to shove, I would have to say that the best of all possible forms of government, the government under which we would all love to live, is a benevolent dictatorship.

It would be best to live under the reign of a perfectly good ruler who was thoroughly empowered to do the good he wanted to do.

Over time, there have been lots of rulers with lots of power. And some of these rulers have been relatively good, some of the time.

But every good ruler who has ever ruled has only been partly good. Every ruler has the same tendency toward sin and foolishness that the rest of us have.

And, of course, no ruler, no matter how good, has ever had the absolute power he would need to accomplish perfectly good ends.

But dream with me for a minute. Imagine a ruler who is **ABSOLUTELY GOOD** and **ABSOLUTELY POWERFUL**.

This ruler would put in place a legal system where all the laws were just. Every lawbreaker would be appropriately and immediately punished. Those who kept the laws would have nothing to fear.

In this society there would be no discrimination or pre-judging.

Under this ruler, the weak would be safe. There would be peace in the streets. Women would feel safe alone at night. Children would be free from abuse and exploitation.

And there would be no fear from outside invasion, because - remember - this ruler is not only all-good, he is all-powerful. Who would dare attack THAT?!

Well, that ruler certainly hasn't appeared...yet.

But when he / He does we'll break out in song. The song we just might sing is *"Joy to the World!"* - and that's our featured song for this morning, the Sunday before Christmas.

The song was written in 1719 by Sir Isaac Watts. It is based on Psalm 98, a psalm that speaks of the day when the ALL-GOOD, ALL-POWERFUL King, the One the Jews called "Messiah," comes to reign.

Isaac Watts was famous for his work as a scientist. He was also widely respected as a Christian who wrote over seven hundred and fifty hymns and choruses. We still sing lots of his songs today.¹

Since the song for this morning's reflection on Christmas is *"Joy to the World"* you might expect that the message will be all about joy.

Well, we will get to joy. But if you listened carefully to the words of the song we just sang, you noted that JOY isn't the big idea of *"Joy to the World."*

Joy is a by-product of the big idea of the song. And the big idea of the song and of the message for today is this: The Baby whose birth we celebrate, the Baby born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, Jesus, was that ALL-GOOD and ALL-POWERFUL King we've always longed for.

Today, our thoughts turn to Jesus' Kingship.

And around the time of Jesus' birth, there were a few people and groups of people who recognized Jesus as a king.

Their responses varied, but by their responses there is no question that they "got it." Jesus was the King.

One of those who "got it" was Herod the Great, the Roman-backed king of Israel. Herod was convinced of Jesus' Kingship. And, for that reason, Herod opposed Jesus.

King Jesus Opposed by King Herod

Herod, the King

I mentioned Herod the Great last Sunday. He was a monster of a man, and he reigned as king from 40 BC until shortly after the birth of Jesus. (around 4 AD)

He actually had great administrative ability. Among other things, he helped the Jews survive a severe famine. He built enormous buildings, among them the temple in Jerusalem.

But history remembers Herod mainly as a man who loved power. He did whatever was necessary to hold on to his power.

He had several close associates, his wife, and two of his sons killed because he thought that they were trying to take his throne.

This prompted Augustus Caesar to remark, *"It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son."*

Herod and the Baby Jesus (Matthew 2:3-8)

Herod, on high alert because of the arrival of Persian magi

One day, some wise men (*magi*) from the east came rolling into Jerusalem, looking for the King - and they weren't looking for King Herod.

They were looking for the one who had been *"born King of the Jews."* They had come to worship that King.

¹ Among them, "O God Our Help in Ages Past," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "I Sing the Mighty Power of God." The melody to today's Christmas carol was written by George Frederick Handel.

Herod had been appointed king by Rome, but the born King will always replace the appointed king. And Herod was not at all happy to learn that there was one who had been born King.

The Bible tells us that Herod was *“troubled.”*

Herod, deeply troubled

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

And why was he troubled? It was because his power was in jeopardy. The recently born King was a threat.²

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.

But he first had to locate the King. He did that by asking around to find out where the Jewish King would be born. And that’s a curiosity.

Herod, evil and pro-active

Information gathering

He was the king of the Jews, but he wasn’t familiar enough with the Hebrew Scriptures to have known the birthplace of the great Jewish Messiah / King.

So, he called in the religious leaders of the day who did know.

They told Herod, ***[5]...“In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: (the prophet Micah, 5:2)***
[6] ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH,

² 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 simple human power grab; 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, “*Boo! I am Satan. Choose me.*” Rather, there is usually a subtlety to the opposition against us. We may or may not recognize power struggles as spiritual battles. They are, nevertheless, ultimately, and essentially, spiritual.

***ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH;
FOR FROM YOU WILL COME FORTH A RULER
WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.”***

When Herod learned the King’s birthplace, He called the *magi* into a closed-door meeting to find out when they had first seen the star that indicated the King’s birth, and which had guided them to Israel.

They told him, which let Herod know how old his young rival was. Then Herod gave the magi a commission.

Herod’s Hate Commission (v. 8)

[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.”

Herod wanted the magi to think that he wanted to join in a big worship service in honor of the young King. (Of course, all he really wanted was to find out where the King was so that he could kill Him.)

When Herod later learned that the *magi* had tricked him and had gone back home without telling him where the “born King” was, he did what people do who cling to power.

Herod, homicidal (vv. 16-18)

[16] Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged and sent men and killed all the boys who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity who were two years old or 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.”***

At earlier periods in his life, Herod took actions that resulted in greater numbers of people dying than he killed here in the slaughter of the innocents.³

But for hateful power-mongering, this is as bad as it gets. He sought to kill the child Jesus just because Jesus was the rightful King.

Herod is the ultimate example of the hunger for power run amuck. He is the epitome of the spirit that refuses at all costs to submit to the sovereignty of King Jesus.

Our song for today urges us to worship King Jesus:

*Joy to the World, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room...*

...and Herod would have nothing of it. There was only room in Herod's heart for one king: King Self.

And his response to Jesus illustrates one way any of us might respond to the good news of the arrival of a Sovereign King.

- Protect personal sovereignty.
- Refuse to submit and stiffen the neck; harden the heart.
- Do away with competition by whatever means are necessary.
- Keep "King Self" on the throne.

If we follow any of these responses to Jesus, we can be assured that joy never comes to our soul.

There were others who recognized Jesus' Kingship and responded differently.

Some were Jews - like Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, and the elderly Simeon and Ana. They knew that Jesus was the King and reveled in that truth.

³ On one occasion, Herod had three thousand people killed in a fit of suspicious rage, many more than were killed in this attempt to kill Jesus.

Others were not Jews. Like those *magi*.

King Jesus Honored by Magi

The "Who's" and "What's" of the Magi

The term *magi* refers to the magicians and astrologers who served as the official priests of the Parthian Empire, located far to the east of Israel.⁴

These *magi* were descendants of the *magicians* over whom the prophet Daniel ruled when he lived in Persia under Darius the Mede six hundred years earlier.⁵

By the time of Jesus' birth, the function of the *magi* in the Parthian Empire had evolved from a purely religious one (court magician, royal astrologer) to a religious / political mix.⁶

One of the defining jobs of the *magi* at the time of Jesus' birth was to choose, using both astronomy and astrology, who would sit on the Parthian throne.

Some of these Parthian "King-Makers" made their way to Palestine, the land of the Jews.

Magi in Jerusalem (v. 1)

⁴ Here is one author's description of 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 safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace of Jerusalem, as is recorded by Matthew...[The *magi*'s] request of Herod regarding him who "*has been born king of the Jews*" was a calculated insult to him who had bribed his way into that office." This description helps us to understand why this power-loving king was troubled at the news of the arrival of the *magi*.

⁵ It is likely that the *magi* had first been exposed to the Hebrew scriptures and to the idea of a coming Jewish Messiah through the ministry of the prophet, Daniel.

⁶ There were some things about the *magi* that were commendable (they were monotheistic), but we can't deny that they practiced pagan rituals.

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

Because of the three kinds of gifts mentioned in the passage, we often assume that there were three *magi*. But Scripture doesn't tell us how many *magi* arrived in Jerusalem.⁷

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

And what brought them to Jerusalem? We've heard it already today. Let's listen to them again.

Magi Seek the Object of Their Worship (v. 2)

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

The *magi* had learned through their studies of constellations - and one exceptional star - to expect a preeminent Jewish King to be born near the city of Jerusalem.

They weren't curiosity seekers. These non-Jews had come for one purpose: to worship the Jewish King.

After their audience with "king" Herod, they left Jerusalem and traveled the five short miles to Bethlehem. (Isn't it striking that Herod didn't walk five miles to see for Himself the long-awaited Messiah...?)

Magi Find and Worship the Born King, Jesus (vv. 9-11)

In the home of Jesus (v. 11a)

⁷ Church tradition assigns to the *magi* the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. But their names are assumption built on assumption.

⁸ One of the fascinating details of Matthew's Gospel, a book that highlights Jesus' royalty, is that the phrase "**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 was referred to as King of the Jews, it was spoken in derision (Mk. 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:3, 37-38; John 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21).

[9] After hearing the king, they went on their way; and behold, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on ahead of them until it came to a stop over the place where the Child was to be found. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. [11a] And after they came into the house they saw the Child⁹ with His mother Mary...

At this point, Jesus, the Child, not the Infant, was at least several months old. He might have been a two-year-old.

Some good amount of time had elapsed between the night when the shepherds saw Jesus lying in a manger (Luke 2), and now, when the *magi* meet Jesus in a Bethlehem house.

So...the manger scenes we grew up with, and which dot our neighborhoods, and which populate popular movies have it all wrong.

The wise men were never there at the Bethlehem stables on the night of Jesus' birth. (And I am sorry if that messes with you...)

What we have here is a very tranquil, domestic scene. Jesus was with His mother, Mary when the *magi* knocked on the door. (We don't know where Joseph was.)

They had finally found the King they were seeking.

At the feet of Jesus - forget decorum!

[11b]...and they fell down and worshipped Him...

Picture this scene and it just might make you squirm.

Here are full-grown men, powerful political figures from a refined culture, prostrate on the ground in front of a Toddler.

⁹ The word used to describe Jesus here (*child*; Greek - *paidios*) is not the same as the word for a newborn infant (Greek - *brephos*).

They threw decorum to the wind, and in an act of total un-self-consciousness, fell down to worship the Child Jesus.

It seems idolatrous - it is idolatrous! - if the Baby is not who we claim He is.

But if Jesus is God in the flesh, it makes perfect sense that *magi* or you or I would fall to the ground and worship Him.

After bowing before the Born King, the *magi* gave Him the gifts they had brought to honor Him.

At the feet of Jesus - extravagant gift-giving 101 (v. 11c)

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

- They gave Him gold, valuable in any culture, ancient or modern.
- They gave Him frankincense, a fragrant perfume.
- They presented Him with myrrh, an aromatic balm, often used in embalming.¹⁰

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

They grasped what our song tells us, that this king would change everything. He would bring blessing to all people everywhere.

They saw that because of this Born Toddler-King, a day would come when (as our song says) *sins and sorrows would no longer grow, when thorns would no longer infest the ground. This Child's blessings will flow as far as the curse is found!*

So, Herod tried to kill Jesus because He was the true king. For the exact same reason, the *magi* worshipped Him.

These *magi* were powerful men. But they knew a greater power when they saw it and responded just as anyone should in the presence of the King.

Conclusion:

Our song says that the coming of Jesus brings joy.

Joy because the righteous, all-powerful, all-good King has come.
 Joy because Jesus, the Savior, reigns.
 Joy because He came to end the reign of sin and of death.
 Joy because He rules the world with truth and grace.

And as you may have noticed, we don't see all of that now.

When Isaac Watts sat down to write the words of our song, he didn't see all that he was writing about.

But he was thinking of a time when Jesus would finally set all things right. That time had not come in Watts' day. It has still not yet come, because when Jesus came to earth, born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, He came for one purpose. He came to bear sin.

So, what we celebrate at Christmas is the arrival of the Son of God when He came to live a perfect life and to die a sacrificial death to bring eternal life to you and me. (See Hebrews 9:27-28)

By His death on the cross, He paid the penalty for our sins.

It was a price we could have never paid. Jesus paid it all. That means that now He can offer eternal life as a gift to anyone who believes in Him for that gift.

We don't come to God, hoping to receive eternal life by offering payment of any kind.

He doesn't even accept our gifts of good works, good intentions, church attendance, or charitable giving if by them we are trying to earn eternal life.

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.

The whole point of Jesus' first visit to earth was to give us a gift we could never afford. And that is a gift that you can receive - today - when you believe Jesus' promise to give you eternal life.

But the clear teaching of the Bible is that Jesus' first arrival on earth would not be His last. Jesus is coming again.

And when He returns, He will reign. He will be recognized for who He truly is: the King of kings and the Lord of lords. (See Revelation 19)

He will be that Ruler we imagined at the beginning, the One who has ABSOLUTE power and is ABSOLUTELY good.

When He reigns, justice will cover the earth. Peace will reign. Love and mercy will flow. The weak will not be exploited. He will reverse the curse.

And until that Day comes, our world is a wreck. There is injustice. There is war and strife. Joy is a scarce commodity and "*Joy to the World*" in most respects is a dream for the future.

Today, Jesus is a king *incognito*. And today, His reign is made manifest when He reigns as King in the hearts of those He has redeemed.

So, if we want our friends and family to see Jesus' royalty, all we need to do is submit to Him the way a subject submits to a king.

For one thing, depend on Him.

Trust Him

Depend on Him and declare your dependence on Him. Tell the people you know that you are depending on Jesus, not an earthly power or prince or policy.

Demonstrate your dependence on Jesus by prayer. Ask God to do the things that only He can do - and give Him credit when He does it.

People who know you will see that you are giving increasing priority to prayer. It identifies you as King Jesus' subject.

For another thing, serve.

Serve

It was easy for the shepherds to find King Jesus on the night of His birth. He was the baby lying in the feeding trough in Bethlehem's stables.

It was easy to spot Him on His last night with His disciples. He was the One washing the feet of His followers.

He was the Servant-King.

When we serve, without an attitude, with a smile, with great energy, we will be showing ourselves to be card-carrying followers of the Servant-King, Jesus.

We enthrone Jesus by our dependence and by our service - and by the way we love.

Love

King Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments were to love God AND to love others. (Matthew 22:37-39) He applied that teaching by the way He lived and loved.¹¹

No one has ever loved the way Jesus loved.

¹¹ The Apostle Paul (who definitely submitted to Jesus' Kingship) wrote that exceptional eloquence, giftedness, encyclopedic knowledge, faith, generosity, and self-sacrifice are worthless if not energized by love. (1 Corinthians 13).

Start to finish, He showed what love is all about every time He interacted with friends or with enemies, with the rich or with the poor, with old or young, women or men, highborn or lowly.

At the end, when Jesus was crucified, they placed a placard on the upright of the cross that read, "***THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.***"

That sign was put in place as mockery, but it was fitting and true. Jesus proved His Kingship when He lovingly gave Himself for us.

When you and I follow King Jesus, we follow Him into a world of love.

You'll say, "*Merry Christmas*" and "*Jesus is King!*" loudest when you love. And when you love like your King loved, you bring joy to the world in His Name.