

Bethlehem-R-rated for Violence

Thomas Robinson, *Advent for Grown-ups 2*, December 4, 2011

Matthew 2:1-18

¹ After **Jesus was born in Bethlehem** in Judea, during the time of **King Herod**, **Magi** from the east came to **Jerusalem** ² and asked, “*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw **his star** when it rose and have come to worship him.*”

³ When **King Herod** heard this he was **disturbed**, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s **chief priests** and **teachers of the law**, he asked them where **the Messiah** was to be born.

⁵ “*In **Bethlehem in Judea**,*” they replied, “*for this is what **the prophet** has written:*

⁶ *‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for **out of you will come a ruler**
who will shepherd my people Israel.’*” [Micah 5:2-3]

⁷ Then **Herod** called the **Magi** secretly and found out from them the **exact time** the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “*Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.*”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were **overjoyed**. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their **treasures** and presented him with gifts of **gold, frankincense and myrrh**.

¹² And having been **warned** in a **dream** not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to **Joseph** in a **dream**. “*Get up,*” he said, “*take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.*”

¹⁴ So **he got up**, took the **child** and his **mother** during the night and left for **Egypt**,
¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod.

And so was filled up what the Lord had said through the prophet:

*“Out of **Egypt** I called **my son**.”* [Hosea 11:1]

¹⁶ When **Herod** realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was **furious**, and he gave orders to **kill all the boys in Bethlehem** and its vicinity who were **two years old and under**, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was filled up:

¹⁸ *“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”* [Jeremiah 31:15]

The Power Struggle of the World

The story of the Bible is of human separation/alienation from God and God's quest to bring us home, back to reality, to our creator, to life. We humans set up life in exile, with our own powers, rewards, and pretend all is fine. This reality is all there is. We don't need/want God.

The story is played out on every scale: from my own selfish human heart to the large structures of power, money, oppression in human institutions, to the realm of heaven and earth. God must deal with all those levels in order to bring us home. How can new vision break in?

The image of the Magi and their gifts shines like a still center in the middle of a storm of fear, manipulation, power run amok, hypocrisy, flight. The world of grown-up power and rule. In the confrontation of King Herod and the infant "king" a new stage of the story opens.

Strangers from the East and the King

Magi, eastern astrologers/philosophers. Like Balaam (Num 24:15-17: *"a man whose eye is opened... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: A star shall come from Jacob, a scepter shall rise from Israel."*) They become Kings (Is 60:1-3). Receive names.

Deep irony: They are foreigners/gentiles following cosmic signs to seek the "king of the Jews" while the current king and religious leaders have no clue and no place for such a king.

Herod, disturbed, recognizes a pattern: the messiah. The priests paraphrase Micah 5:2, an indictment of Herod's claims. He's appointed by Rome, not anointed, not of David's line. Religion is a tool to be manipulated. He builds temple but wants to kill God's Messiah.

The Magi take information and go. Herod has military power, wealth, imperial backing. But if the sign they follow is true, an utterly different power, far greater, has come to birth.

Gifts for a New King, a New Kingdom

Their miraculous star brings them to a house in a small village and a baby, but they are not disappointed. Their eye is opened. They're filled with joy and worship and give gifts representing their best treasures: gold, frankincense, myrrh. A new king, sign of God.

Which power is real? Could the power Herod embodies be challenged by this village baby? Herod's power will crucify this baby. Can we really believe that Jesus' power is greater?

Both Kings Strike Back

The Magi leave. In a dream Joseph is warned that Herod will follow the Magi looking for Jesus. He and Mary leave for Egypt. Jesus is in exile, like Israel in Egypt, Babylon; like humanity. Mt. quotes Hosea 11:1 – the messiah embodies, shares, and redeems Israel's exile.

But Joseph's worst nightmare couldn't imagine the depravity Herod was capable of. We can. Civilian slaughter has almost become standard procedure during the last century. Herod's rage orders not a search for Jesus but the slaughter of all baby boys, like Pharaoh. Mt quotes Jeremiah. Raging human violence brings wailing and loss. Destroyed tribes/boys.

But the Other King will also strike back. He emptied himself in order to bring his enemies home to hope and new life. He is vulnerable in this world but not defeated. He is crucified but conquers death with new life. He strikes back with forgiveness, reconciliation, life. Which power is real? Which will last? Which do I trust? Which do I live by?