

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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The magi have fascinated Christians for thousands of years. They are depicted in 3rd century frescos in the catacombs of Rome and were carved into the façades of Chartres Cathedral in the 13th century. They were the subject of great artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, and Dürer. And most church nativity scenes, as well as at-home devotional nativities, would look incomplete without them. But it's only twelve verses and two mentions in one gospel that have sparked our fixation.

Scholars believe that the magi were educated, foreign, astrologers and religious leaders. They were connected to foreign rulers who had been at war with Rome for over sixty years, and today's story reveals that they influenced another country's government. When they arrived, they asked one question: "Where is the newborn ruler of the Judeans?" But, this English translation is rubbish. A more accurate translation from the original Greek is, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Judeans?" Remember, Herod bribed Mark Antony to put him on the throne, and he was not of Davidic lineage. The magi wanted to see the legitimate king of the Judeans, not the one who received a title from the Romans and acted as a puppet ruler. The magi's question was political and intentionally subversive.

And this is key to understanding Matthew's story. You see, today's reading is a part of the introduction where the author laid out what was going to be discussed and how it fits together. What we'll see is that one of Matthew's favorite words is "kingdom." Throughout the gospel, we will compare and contrast God's kingdom with the kingdoms of the world. At the beginning, Matthew showed us how Herod and Jesus use power differently. Like with the magi, it's all about politics, because "politics," by definition, is about the distribution of power.¹

Herod's politics were centered in deceit, fear, and murder. He lied without restraint, manipulated religion for his own ends, and murdered anyone who dared question his right to rule. After all, he had already murdered his brother-in-law, his wife's grandfather, his wife, her mother, and two of his own sons all to keep power. What we'll find as today's story continues is that Herod will carry on his murderous streak after the magi defy his request for information. Herod will order the slaughter of children two and under from in and around Bethlehem to calm his insecurity and fears.

As theologian Diana Butler Bass puts it, "It's hard to imagine anything more heartless, brutal, and cruel than to punish the innocent in order to maintain status and privilege.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics>, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/politics?s=t>, <http://ptstulsa.edu/churchpolitics>, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politics>

The Christmas story ends with a tragedy. It begins with the announcement of the birth of a child; it concludes with the murder of many. A[n] authoritarian [dictator] exercised his power to destroy the weakest members of society. Jesus' family [fled] to Egypt as refugees. The Magi escaped by a different route. The bodies of babies lay dead in the streets...

Christmas does not come easily. Peace on Earth terrifies and threatens those who have prospered under the old order. Corrupt [rulers] will lie and murder — do anything — to stop the possibility of God's dream made manifest in the world. Herod was one more tyrant in the brutal history of tyrants. When it comes to human governments, there will be good rulers and there will be mediocre ones. But there will be oppressors and [tyrants] aplenty — even after the Prince of Peace is born. Another Herod always awaits, standing at the ready, evil intentions primed to execution.”²

Yet while from a different faith tradition, socio-economic standing, and culture, the magi foreshadow Jesus' response to those who want to want to control with fear. You see, the next time we will hear the phrase “King of the Judeans” is in the lead up to Jesus' crucifixion. And throughout the rest of Matthew, we'll discover how God's kingdom works. For God's kingdom seeks love instead of control. God's reign is centered in service instead of being served. God's realm seeks forgiveness instead of revenge. God's rule reveals that true wealth is achieved by giving it away to support the least of these.

² <https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-83c>

And this message is as important for us to hear today as it was during Jesus' life, in Rome's catacombs, or in 15th century paintings. These magi traveled from afar not to honor power, fear, and military might. Rather, they traveled to honor a true king for all people. A ruler who prioritizes people over profits. A leader who knows that love is more powerful than fear. A lord that had come to bring together the outsiders— those from a foreign land; ones who walked, talked, and acted in different ways; those with different religious backgrounds and beliefs; and ones who came to journey toward a world built on God's vision that we are all siblings.

Like Jesus, these magi disobeyed when the ruler opposed God's vision. Like Jesus, these magi discerned deceit and trusted the truth. Like Jesus, these magi were brave following God's glimpses of hope amid deep darkness. Like Jesus, these magi know that God is always with us no matter how dark, difficult, or dreary life looks.

Friends, this is God's gift. It's a reminder to journey with God's vision as our focus. A call to not lose focus when discomfort sets in. For no matter the ruler, we worship Immanuel – God who is with us. We trust God's truth rooted in love and grace. We discern deceit; we are bold and brave; and at times, we, like the magi, will take the road less traveled towards God's kingdom. May we offer the gifts of ourselves to help bring about God's love and liberation to a world so in need this year and always. Merry Christmas and a blessed Epiphany Sunday, dear friends. Amen.