The Tale of Two Kings

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[0:00] Matthew chapter 2 at verse 1. Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise! men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, In Jerusalem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet. And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly, and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I too may come and worship him. After listening to the king, they went on their way, and behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them, until it came to rest over the place where the child was born. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.
And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said, Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you. For Herod is about to search for the child, and to destroy him. And he rose, and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet. Out of Egypt I called my son. Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of his own precious and most holy word.
Well, Christmas is over. And in the run-up to Christmas Day, all through December, churches all over Edinburgh, all over Scotland, all over the world have been so keen to impress upon us the reason for the season. Christmas is a wonderful time of community, gift-giving, food-sharing, even forgiveness, maybe. But the real reason that we celebrate Christmas is because Jesus, God's own son, came into the world to save his people. God himself came down, humbled himself to be with us so that sinners can be reconciled with God. So we know the reason for the season. We know why we celebrate Christmas. But once Christmas is over, what then? What happens now? What does it mean for us on the 28th of December? What does it mean for us in the middle of July? Well, I think the passage that George read for us today presented us with clear guidance for what it means for how we should live.
[4:08] We're presented with two kings in that passage, representing two very different ways of living. We see an imposter in the palace who will demonstrate that he'll do anything to hold on to power. And we see a true king, a real king, who demonstrates his power in humility. And we're left with a choice. Which way for us?

Which path? Which king will we follow? Well, first of all, I'd like to look at the king who'll do anything to hold on to power. So in our passage after Jesus, the first person that Matthew mentions is Herod. This is Herod. He built great palaces. That's why he's called great, great feats of engineering. He's not called great because he's a great guy. Herod is known throughout history as a power hungry and bloodthirsty dictator. We've got extra biblical accounts from Jewish historian Josephus and other people. They record him as a man of great ambition and power, but also a man marked by

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cruelty and paranoia. So Herod was king in Judea, the king under Roman power. He was only half Jewish. In fact, his father's family were from the land of Edom and they were conquered and incorporated into Judea and they were kind of made Jews by adoption, forced to adopt the Jewish religion. And we know that his family was rich. His father before him was politically very savvy. And we know that Herod too was a bit of a slippery customer. And when he saw opportunities to grab power, to stab people in the back, well, he took them. He made alliances with the Romans, Roman rulers to gain power. And he went to extreme lengths to hold on to that power. So the man who's on the throne of Judea is not tricky, but he's ruling at the time when
Jesus is born. And we read in our passage that wise men came to him. And these wise men, we don't know exactly who they were. We don't know how many there were. Maybe we thought there were three. That's what we usually see depicted, but the Bible doesn't say how many. We likely get the idea of three because they bring three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That's not in the Bible how many there are.
We do know that they come from the East and the gifts that they bring are commonly associated with Arabia. So maybe that's where they came from. And even calling them wise men is a translation choice.
The word in Greek is magos. We sometimes hear that as magi. And in Acts, Paul and Barnabas meet magos and pathos. And there, the word's translated as magician. It's called a false prophet. So maybe there are magicians. Maybe there are astrologers looking to the skies for guidance. So these magi, they've seen a star and they followed it. The astrologers reading their star signs.
[7:39] And they come to Herod and they ask Herod, where's this king? Where's this child that's been born king of the Jews? And of course, when Herod hears that there's another king, he is troubled. And we read that the whole city's troubled too. Now these visitors have maybe brought a large caravan of people with them, lots of goods for their journey. So maybe they're causing tons of traffic and that's why all Jerusalem's troubled. Or maybe they know, they've heard why these people are here looking for the king of the Jews. And they know the king who's currently sitting on the throne. They know what his reaction is likely to be. And they're anxious. So Herod calls the chief priests and the scribes together and he asks them where the Christ will be born. It's interesting, the wise men, the magi, they come, they ask for the king of the Jews and Herod asks for the Christ. It's maybe that he can't bring himself to say, where's the king of the Jews? Because that's his title. But I think it's also because Herod knew something of the coming Messiah. He knew that there was a savior prophesied and that was going to come. So he goes to the chief priests, the seminary professors of the day.

And they tell him that through a combination quotation, two different passages put together from the Old Testament, Micah 5, which we read at the beginning, and 2 Samuel chapter 5.
And in verse 6, we can read, So Herod finds out the place, Bethlehem, that's where he's going to be born.
We're going to come to the horrific acts that Herod commits as a result of this, known as the massacre of the innocents. But before that, there's another lesson, I think, here. Another reason why Herod makes us feel so unsettled. You see, Herod's not ignorant of Christ. He recognizes it as the coming Messiah. He just refuses to surrender to him. Maybe for us, it's like being brought up in a Christian home with Christian parents and continuing to go to church. You know that there's a God.
You know that you're in need of a Savior. You know that Jesus is a Savior. He's come to earth. You never really receive that truth in your heart. Maybe you've been in church all your life, 20, 50, 70 years, but you've never let Jesus enter into your heart. Maybe you're deliberately holding him at a distance, never surrendering because you're not willing to give up control over your life.
[10:46] Maybe you think to yourself, okay, Jesus, you can have Christmas. Just don't take my throne. I'm happy to celebrate. I'm happy to give you a whole day, a fortnight, the whole month of December.

But my life's my own. And when January rolls around, I want to pursue the things that I want to do. Don't hold me back from being true to my true desires.
Well, Herod starts plotting straight away. He quietly asks the visitors, quietly, when the star appeared to them. And he tells them to go and find the child and then come back and tell him under the pretense of wanting to go and worship this king of the Jews himself. And the men go and they search for Jesus. And when they don't return, when Herod realizes he's been duped, he's furious.

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And because he's secretly asked the time of when the star appeared, he now has a clear timeline. And he commands that all the baby boys who were born, who are under two years old, are killed. This is pure evil. But it's not out of character for Herod. According to historians, he'll go on to kill more people than this. Even his own sons and his own wife, when they threatened his place on the throne, were killed. He killed his own family to protect his seat on the throne of Judea.
[12:28] Herod's the epitome of evil. He's an emblem for evil now. And Shakespeare's Macbeth, when somebody's playing the role of the villain, he's told, don't out-Hered, Herod. Herod is now a byword for pure badness and evil. Or maybe you're sitting in your seats today after a lovely Christmas and you're thinking, why is this guy preaching about a murderous megalomaniac? Well, it's because, well, Herod's obvious outward sin is cold-blooded murder. I think his inward sin, the thing that's driving him to act, is his pride. You see, Herod's an imposter on that throne. He didn't inherit it. He bought it. He schemed for it. And he didn't fulfill the role of a king. He didn't love his people. He didn't care for them, protect them, and provide for them. He used them to serve himself.

Herod made himself a king. And his pride means he'll do anything that he has to do to stay on that throne. Pride's the first sin that we have in the Bible. Adam and Eve, when they were in the Garden of Eden, they had everything that they could have wanted, all the beauty, the comfort, the food, even the presence of God himself. And yet they wanted more. And when they were told that they could have more, that they themselves could be like God's, their pride allowed them to reach out and take it. They wanted to sit on the throne of their own lives. They wanted to be their own king. They didn't want to bow to anybody else. No matter how great and powerful and kind and loving that king that king was. So you see the relevance for us. The reason I think it makes sense for us to talk about Herod today is that when it comes to pride, without God's grace, I am Herod.
Without Jesus, I want to sit on the throne of my own life. I want to be in charge. I want to serve myself and no one else. When we meet Herod in the gospel, he's already, he already has power. He's got authority. He's got tons of wealth. His pride wasn't satisfied. Because when you live by pride, you wake up every morning telling yourself that this is all on you. Everything you have is what you've earned.
And everyone else is a threat. C.S. Lewis, who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia, he also wrote a book called Mere Christianity. And in the chapter in that book on pride, he calls it, the chapter is called The Great Sin. And Lewis says that pride is the complete anti-God state of mind.
[15:23] The complete anti-God state of mind. So two things on pride. So first of all, pride separates us from God. Pride isn't primarily about liking yourself too much, but it's refusing to be dependent on anyone or anything else. Pride is a desire to live without surrender to anything or anyone. I'll work it out for myself. I'll justify my own existence. And then I'll remain in control of my life. Pride even resists grace. So we're saved by God's grace from our sins. But grace isn't something that we can earn for ourselves. Ephesians 2.8 tells us, for by grace you've been saved through faith. This is not your own doing. It's a gift of God. It's a free gift. But every gift must be received. And pride doesn't receive.

Pride insists on earning or ruling. So Herod's the perfect example, and by perfect example I mean worst possible example of what it means to be prideful. He can't receive the kingdom. He can only possess things. So pride separates us from God. And secondly, pride also separates us from other people.
So maybe you don't feel like you have a pride issue. But if that's the case, why does it bother you so much when somebody snubs you? Or when somebody doesn't take notice of you the way that you think that they should? Why does it wind you up so much when other people flaunt their successes in front of you? If you're not pride, you should be able to shrug these things off. Don't let them get to you.
But they do get to us. They get right under our skin. And they gnaw away at us. Because our pride is in competition with other people. So pride's competitive by its very nature. You can't be proud in isolation. You need somebody to be proud against or proud over. You need somebody to be smarter than.
You need somebody to be more successful than. You need somebody to be more successful than. More hardworking than. Somebody to be more Christian than. Pride's even in churches when we think that our performance is going to make us better than someone else. Pride doesn't care what you're proud of. It only places you above others.

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[18:08] Robert Green's a famous author. I don't know if you've maybe seen his book. The 48 Laws of Power. He writes about strategy and power and seduction. Herod would have loved his stuff. And I saw a video of him recently. And in that video, he said, everyone has an aura. And when you walk into an office or into a world, everyone is reading that aura off you. And he says, you've got two kinds of aura. You've got weakness and you've got power. And he says, and this is a quote, you want to project an aura that excites, intrigues, or even intimidates people.

That's how you get a promotion. That's how you beat the loser at the desk next to you to go in that sales conference with the boss. Because that's how you earn his trust. And that's how you get into his role when he slips up. This isn't just a description of a prideful heart, but a celebration of it.
It's like we're called to be like this by a world that wants to climb to the top, embrace pride, climb over other people to get what you want. Lewis, C.S. Lewis writes, pride leads a person to look down on others and makes it impossible to look up to God. Tim Keller says that in the ancient pagan world, people thought the world was brought into existence by warring gods. So it makes sense that they believe that that's how you to live your life, warring against each other.
And then maybe today, post-Enlightenment Edinburgh, we believe that the world was brought about by wild, violent forces of nature. So maybe we have to fight for our agenda to be pushed through, for our place in the world.
But the most ancient and the most modern ideas about existence, about life, we've got the same essence at their core. Do what you do to manipulate yourself into a position of power. Use it to your advantage. I mean, do everything you can to hold on to it. Maybe Herod was merely a product of his time.
[20:31] Maybe we're just a product of ours. But the nativity has turned the pagan and the modern idea of what it means to be human on its head. Because the nativity introduces us to the king who shows his power in humility.

So our passage today starts by laying down concrete historic facts about the people and places that the good news of Jesus took place in and around.
And this is really important because Matthew's a man who Josephus calls, has the scriptures imprinted in his heart. He's going to show us that Jesus coming into the world fulfills Old Testament prophecy.
And by pinning us down to real people and places and times, we see that Matthew isn't merely writing a story that fits the things that God promised long before. But that in Jesus, God is, in fact, fulfilling those promises, bringing his promises to life.
So our passage starts after Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And Bethlehem is a city of David where King David was born. And this is where the Messiah is going to be born also.
[21:46] Matthew's already put considerable effort into making it clear that Jesus is of the lineage of David. Just really quickly, in chapter one, we begin with a genealogy of Jesus, where he came from.

It tells us that Jesus is the Christ, the son of David, the shepherd king. And then he gives us the generations of Abraham leading to Jesus. And then we see that Jesus is, in fact, descended from the line of David.
And then as we read, it goes on from Abraham to David in 14 generations. Then David to Israel going into exile in Egypt is 14 generations.
And then from exile to Jesus coming is 14 generations. We know that it's not a comprehensive list of all the names. So why is it presented like this? Well, there's a Jewish number code called Gemachia.
14 is the value of David. So in this genealogy, Matthew is saying David, David, David, 14, 14, 14, David, David, David.
[22:48] It's really important for us to understand that Jesus is coming from the line born in the city of David. And the one who's prophesied, the one who's coming, he's prophesied in 2 Samuel, chapter 5.

The second part of that quotation that we read earlier on. The one who's going to shepherd the scattered sheep of Israel has appeared. And unlike Herod, he was born into a rich family, lived in palaces, used people for his own ends.
The rightful king, the true king, arrives in humility. Born where the animals are kept. Laid in a manger. In feed and animal spit.

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Jesus is born in squalor. And born into a world in chaos. There's an illegitimate king on the throne. The people of the city of David, who should be overjoyed that the king has come, are troubled. Innocent bloodshed. The world's sick with sin. And it's the magi. The outsiders. The ones who are searching for the king.
[24:08] They follow the star. The star that they'd seen before that had led them to Herod. And it goes ahead of them and stands over the place where the child was. The magi.

When they see the star, they rejoice exceedingly with great joy. In Greek, that word for great is megas. They were filled with mega joy.
Mega joy because they saw that the Messiah had come. And they came in. And they collapsed in front of Jesus. And they worshipped him. This is the Gentiles.
Not the Jewish people. This is the Gentiles coming from far away places. To worship the Jewish Messiah. We then have these two dreams.
The first is seen by the magi who avoid Herod on their way home. And the second is where Joseph sees an angel. He tells him to flee with the royal, with the holy family to Egypt.
[25:14] And they live there until Herod dies. Now, for us, we just read that as God speaking to Joseph and saving Jesus' life.

But for Matthew's immediate Jewish audience, alarm bells are going off. There's a siren going off for them. Because the great hero of the Jewish faith, Moses, he was living under the kingship of an Egyptian ruler.
And he decided that the people that they held as slaves were becoming too powerful. And he decided to kill all the newborn babies. And Moses' mother made a basket and placed it on the river so that Moses would be discovered.
And he was found by Pharaoh's daughter. And he was saved. Later, Moses had to flee from the place where Israel was held in exile.
And he waited until the evil king died before coming home. And in here we see Jesus fled to the place of exile to keep him safe until Herod has died. This is the story of Exodus happening again.
[26:19] And to help us see it fully, verse 14 quotes Hosea 11.1 for us. Verse 15, it says, This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Out of Egypt I have called my son. In Hosea, it's Israel who's God's child. What Matthew's showing us here is that Jesus is a personification of the true and obedient Israel.
Everything God's chosen people were supposed to be. And Jesus is also the new and better Moses who's going to lead his people from slavery to sin and into a new land flowing with blessings.
Jesus is the opposite of Herod the Great. He's Jesus the humble. Jesus the lowly. Jesus the gentle. He wasn't born into richness.
He didn't build fortified palaces. He didn't win friends and influence people by handing over brown envelopes stuffed with cash. Jesus the king of glory. Jesus the king of glory.
[27:30] Left the majesty of heaven to be born into the world as a helpless baby. Fully dependent. So what does this mean for us? Well it shows us that the Christian path is one of humility too.

Pride was Herod sin. Pride was Adam and Eve sin. Pride was Satan sin. Pride told Herod that this little baby had come to compete with him.
To take something from him. And even today the proud look at Jesus and see a rival to the throne of their life. But God's not come to compete with us.
He's come to give us so much more than we could ever achieve ourselves. Even with all the gold or all the armies on earth. The more pride learns about Christ.
The more it panics. Because pride doesn't ask. Is this true? It asks. Does it leave me in charge? Meanwhile the humble.
[28:36] Knowing that they can't save themselves. They see this God child. And they rejoice with mega joy. I wonder if that's how we're feeling today.

Friends Christ hasn't come to take anything from you. He's come to give you life. He's a true king who laid aside his glory. Bore our sin on the cross and rose again.
So that proud rebels like us. Could be forgiven. Restored and made new. But listen. This is important. He won't share the throne of your heart.
The invitation to come to Jesus is simple. But it's costly. You must repent of your pride. Lay down your crown. And trust yourself fully to Jesus.

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In losing your life. In giving your life away to him. You'll find it. And in bowing to this king. You'll discover the freedom. That you were created for.
[29:44] Let's pray. Lord God. Humble us before you. Let us not ever fall into serving only ourselves.

Let us not become too prideful. To see others as fellow creatures. And only as rivals to get ahead of. Lord. Make us constantly bowing down before you Lord.
In everything that we do. Help us to surrender to you each and every day. Acknowledging our weakness. Our forgetfulness. Our pride. Lord would you lead us and guide us. In the ways of righteousness.
Because you know everything we need. And you give to all who ask. So we ask that in Jesus name. Amen. Amen.

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