

When Christmas Gets Real

Matthew 2:(1-12), 13-23

Farmville Baptist Church

January 1, 2023

Well, the celebrating is just about over, isn't it? I don't know about you, but we're pretty much Christmased-out at the Tyler house! We've decked the halls and opened the presents. We've visited with family and eaten all the food. We've even rung in a new year! As I put up the calendar for that new year in my office today, I realized that things were getting back to normal around here. This week, we'll be back to the days of school drop-offs and pick-ups, trash runs and grocery lists, schedules and regular bedtimes.

What a let-down!

Every year, we get to the end of the holiday season and I experience it. Oh, don't get me wrong – Christmas is a busy

time with special obligations, and I enjoy a return to some sort of normalcy. Yet it's always a little sad, even a bit depressing, to pack everything away for another year and get back to the routine of life.

There comes a time after any celebration or triumph, of course, when the revelers go home, the applause and laughter dies down, and life in all its myriad of joy and sorrow, excitement and drudgery, purpose and stress reasserts itself. It's called "reality," of course, and reality can hit us, hard. The classic example of this in my own life was the first week after Cadance and I got back from our honeymoon. The wedding in her hometown had been wonderful, of course, and our honeymoon down in South Carolina was an amazing time of relaxation and adventure – I'll have to tell you about our two-hour architectural walking tour of Charleston sometime, or unknowingly eating lunch

within spitting distance of an alligator! But then we got home and went back to work. Deadlines and bosses and the daily grind started back up again. And one night that first week home, Cadance and I had our first married fight – over how to cook green beans. It was nothing serious, and in the end was fairly inconsequential, but it was a clear sign that the honeymoon was over and the hard, but infinitely rewarding, work of integrating our lives together as husband and wife had begun.

If the Christmas glow hasn't worn off for you yet, it probably soon will, and all of us will be soon deep in the day-to-day of life in 2023. But I hope we won't leave the story of Christmas completely behind us, because Christmas isn't a story for one moment or even one day or one week in the year. Christmas lives in the reality of daily life – it's highs and it's lows, it's good and it's evil, it's joys and it's sorrows.

Nothing shows this more, I think, than our pair of passages today from Matthew's Gospel: the story of a group of magi and two kings. Here, in the story of wise men from the east and the flight of Jesus to Egypt before Herod's attack on Bethlehem, we find the account of when Christmas became real.

Of course, it began in spectacular fashion with the coming of the Light. In Matthew's Gospel, that Light was heralded by a literal light, a star in the heavens. It was so bright that it drew the attention of magi from Persia, wise men, probably aristocrats; their role in society combined the identities of religious sages, stellar scientists, and royal advisors. Yet for all their privilege and access to power in their own land, their home was under foreign occupation, just like the regions of Galilee, where Nazareth was, and Judea, where Bethlehem was located. Theologian Kelley

Nikodeha suggests that they were subversives, working to resist the foreign domination of their own land. Perhaps now, in Judea, there was a new king that could do the same thing there. This new king wasn't their king, but, "if it could happen in Judea, it could happen in Persia."¹ So they set out to search for the new ruler who would bring change, who would make a difference in the world – and they hoped that difference would somehow matter in their far-off homeland, too.

As they searched, they visited with the current "king" of Judea, Herod the Great. Herod was no Jew, and he wasn't really king, either. At best, he was a local strongman on the payroll of Rome, a puppet to keep things from getting out of hand from the Roman point of view. As long as the tax money rolled into the imperial treasury and no peasant

¹ Kelley Nikodeha, *The First Advent in Palestine*, 134.

revolt got out of hand, Rome gave Herod a lot of leeway. And with that leeway, Herod built huge buildings – monuments to his own ego – and killed lots of people who seemed suspicious to him, including one of his wives and some of his children – testimony to Herod’s insecurities and fears. Yet for all of his narcissism and paranoia, Herod was no one’s fool. He understood power: how to get it, how to keep it, and how to use it for his own benefit. A new king was the last bit of news he wanted – but he knew how to take advantage of the early warning.

First, he sent the magi on to Bethlehem. He didn’t know if they would come back or not – but they might, and if so, they could give him some vital intelligence. Sure, he would go and “worship” the new king – with a sword through the crib! Herod didn’t know if the wise men would buy his false display of piety – and they didn’t – but he didn’t have

anything to lose and a good deal to gain. Maybe they would return, and he would know just which house to raid, just which baby to kill.

Of course, we know from the text that the magi did not do what Herod had asked of them. Sure, they went to Bethlehem. Sure, the star showed them the house where the baby lay. Sure, they bowed before him and gave him gifts – kingly gifts! Their worship was a political act, a subversive act, as it were. They were celebrating that forces were at work that could topple the powers-that-be. But, strangely enough, there is every indication that they were going to do just what Herod had asked them to do. I don't know if they quite deserve the title of *wise* men, after all! Good thing God's angel was on top of things.

The magi, we are told, left Bethlehem for the journey home – but they bypassed Herod. No new intel on the

location of Jesus would come from them. But Herod knows the town – and Herod is not one to be trifled with. He has a reputation for cruelty after all, combined with his well-known paranoia and lust to remain in power. So Joseph probably didn't need another dream to tell him to get out of Dodge – but he gets it anyways. An angel tells him to flee. And Joseph doesn't question it: he got Mary up, they bundled Jesus out the door, and they fled. Where could they go? Nazareth was their hometown – but it was within Herod's sphere of influence. Going there would simply prolong the inevitable search and ultimate murderous result. But Egypt – Egypt was within reach. There were Jewish communities there, and, most importantly, Herod had no power there. Even if he got wind that they had become refugees in Egypt, he couldn't reach them there. So the Holy

Family sought asylum in the land of the Egyptians. They became refugees who crossed borders in fear for their lives.

Now, I've got to pause here – because I cannot read this story without remembering the story of a woman that Cadance met. Our seminary included as part of the curriculum a trip to experience ministry in another culture, and Cadance's trip was to the country of El Salvador. While she was there, she met all sorts of folks, worshipped in local churches, and visited with local families. One of the people she met there was a woman with a young boy. Now, El Salvador has many problems; one of the most prevalent is a good deal of gang activity. This woman lived in an area of the city where gangs were very active, and she was trying to avoid their influence. One day, some gang members came to get her to do their bidding. She was a tough cookie – but she had a young son. One of the gang members threatened her

boy by putting his gun in the boy's mouth. He said, "If you don't do what we want, next time, we will kill him."

What would you have done in that situation? This woman didn't see any other option: she ran. She fled the country and headed for the United States. Crossing the border, she was detained – and eventually deported back to where she had fled. When Cadance met her, she had done everything she could to protect her son, but she couldn't find safety. She was right back where she had started.

Jesus and his family were more fortunate. Though we do not know how they were received in Egypt, they were able to stay there for some time – at least a few months, maybe a few years. And while they were there, back in Bethlehem, Herod put his backup plan into motion. Since he did not have the information for a surgical strike on the baby boy of one family, he went for the eradication method: if a baby boy

in Bethlehem is going to threaten my throne, then there won't be any baby boys in Bethlehem. His soldiers went and brutally killed every boy in the area. We don't know how many – there is no other historical record of what, tragically, was after all a fairly minor and localized military operation. But it's lack of novelty doesn't change the horrific reality: a whole cohort of Bethlehem boys, maybe a dozen, maybe two, maybe even more were murdered.

There, in the blood-soaked streets of Bethlehem, Christmas became real – because, for all that we tend to view the Christmas story through the eyes of sweet children's Nativity plays and nostalgia for family and church celebrations gone by, Christmas is utterly confrontational and ultimately subversive. It has a real-world impact, and not everyone wants that real-world impact to come into being. To a world of darkness, light appeared. To a world

held in the grip of greed and domination, love and compassion was born. To a world where kings and governors held onto their power by keeping the populace under control and crushing all opposition into the dust, God's Savior proclaimed a message of hopeful joy and love-tinged freedom from sin, death, and oppression. Herod, perhaps surprisingly, is one of the people in the Christmas story who first grasped what it meant – and he responded with great swiftness and cruelty.

Yet for all the terror he sowed in the hills of Judea, all the innocent lives he ended unjustly in his bid to clutch power just a little bit longer, Herod failed in his homicidal goals. The new king had fled because of God's intervention – and though Herod would die before Jesus returned from Egypt, and his sons would rule after him, a new era had begun. It was no longer an era where the way it was is the

way it always has to be. It was no longer an era where the weak, the poor, the defenseless, and the oppressed could hope for no help and see no way forward. It was no longer an era where the mighty could count on their own way at the expense of everyone else. No, Christmas meant that a new way, a better way, God's way, had become real.

But that reality doesn't mean that the Herods of our world won't have their real impact. Christmas is confrontation, conflict. As we live between the first coming and the second coming of Jesus, modern-day Herods, international tyrants like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un, but also incredibly personal tyrants like abusive spouses and toxic bosses, these contemporary dictators and persecutors continue to spread havoc in the lives of whole populations and pour terror over the hearts of individuals, all in a bid to retain power, control, and allegiance. These petty human

despots, both in positions of international influence and in incredibly personal relationships, can cause so much damage.

But they will not have the last word.

Instead, the reality of Christmas is that God has entered human existence, and has experienced the worst of human existence. He knows our worst pains, the things we hardly dare to bring to mind. And he works, actively, to save us, to save the least of us, from the horrors of our lives and our world. Famine? Disease? Slavery? Abuse? War? Oppression in every form? God is actively at work, in and through Jesus, to mitigate those tragedies in the now and to end those tragedies in the coming kingdom. How? By working miraculously and supernaturally through his Spirit, but also by working diligently and systematically through his people, his church – through you and me. We are the hands

and feet of Jesus, after all, and so we are how Christmas becomes real to the refugee, to the abused child, to the hungry family, to the sick patient, to the child of God who is hurting. When we do the work of Jesus, when we do the things he taught us, the things he did and showed us how to do, we are making Christmas real.

Howard Thurman was a prominent theologian and civil rights leader in the first two-thirds of the 20th century. He mentored civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and he wrote books about spirituality that are still read today. One of the poems he penned captures the lesson of Matthew 2 perfectly:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home

When the shepherds are back with their flock

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among others,

To make music in the heart.²

My friends, the song of the angels is stilled. The star has dimmed. The kings and princes are home and the shepherds are back with the flock. Now is the time to roll up our sleeves and do the work of Christmas in a world that cries out for it. Now is the time for Christmas to get real – in and through us.

² The Work of Christmas, Howard Thurman