

Eric Dupee

1/7/24, Epiphany, Mathew 2:1-12      “Jesus Christ is Lord”

When the Wise men saw the star, they could not stay where they were. They had to get moving. The Wise Men from the East stirred things up. Jesus was the light of the world. The light coming into the world was symbolized by a star in the sky. The Wise Men, or Magi as they are also called, saw the star at its rising. They made the journey to Jerusalem and started asking questions. “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?”

That really stirred things up, because the title “king of the Jews” was already taken. Herod the Great’s ancestors did not come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but they were forced to convert to Judaism. Although the Roman Empire was ultimately in charge, Rome made Herod the most powerful man in the region.

Herod was so good at courting the favor of the Roman Empire, Rome gave him the title, and he was the first to be called, “king of the Jews.” Herod was very clever and industrious, but he was also without a conscience when it came to protecting his own interests. When he felt that his safety was threatened, he executed one of his wives and two of his own sons.

For these Magi to come into Jerusalem suggesting there was an alternative “king of the Jews,” out there somewhere, meant there would be trouble. If Herod was willing to murder his own wife and kids, there was no telling what he was capable of when it came to protecting his power and privilege. In fact, in an effort to eliminate Jesus, Herod will eventually order the murder of every child under the age of two years old, in and around Bethlehem.

Imagine your life being governed by that kind of a ruler. If you were an ordinary person like Mary or Joseph, you were living at a time when your homeland was occupied by a foreign Empire. Rome installed local rulers like Herod to ruthlessly do their bidding. Ordinary people must have felt they were at the mercy of these powerful forces.

I think that’s how many of us feel today. Governments are forces that have a profound impact on our lives. Political parties are forces. The Republican party fights to implement its agenda. The Democratic party fights to implement its agenda. In November,

we vote for a president. There's a lot of uncertainty about that right now. It will probably involve the Supreme Court, another force that governs our lives.

As if the battle in our own government, the fighting between Hamas and Israel, and Russia and Ukraine, were not distressing enough, this past week ISIS decided to unleash more terrorism. Now, ISIS and Iran are in the mix. It's enough to make a person not only distressed, and anxious, but it also brings about a sense of helplessness in the face of these powerful forces.

Herod's title was king of the Jews. He believed he was in control, but we know better and just as importantly, the Wise Men knew better. They didn't trek across the desert to see Herod. That would not be a life-changing experience. They were not going to present Herod with valuable gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They wanted to see the real King of the Jews, the divine ruler, face to face. That's what makes a journey across the desert worthwhile. If they could just get there, it would make all the difference.

Have you had an experience of being blessed by simply showing up somewhere. I sometimes feel that way about vacation. I hate going to the airport and getting on a plane, but I know if I just get to my destination, it will do me a world of good. Or you decided to attend a funeral to support a friend, and you were so glad you did. It was where you needed to be. Sometimes getting to a place and just being there is transformational. I think that's an important thing to remember when fear and anxiety become paralyzing.

Maybe you remember, roughly 5 years ago, they took down the statue of Robert E Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. At that time, there was a protest against the statue's removal mounted by neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klansmen. They marched through the University of Virginia campus, carrying torches, and chanting things like "Jews will not replace us."

A short time later, a group of neo-Nazis applied to hold a rally on the Boston Common. At that time, there was a rise of anti-Semitism in America. This group was given a permit and allowed to hold their rally, because of their freedom of speech. But a big protest developed and I decided to go. I decided that I could sit at home and lament all the bad stuff going on in the world, or I could just show up at the event.

I put on my clergy collar and went to the Boston Common with my friends Jessica and Greta. There had to have been thousands of people there, from every walk of life. Here's what I realized. My presence wasn't all that important. They didn't wait to start the

thing until I arrived. However, on a side note, I will say I was interviewed by reporter Sera Congi of Channel 5 in Boston. I have a recording of it. We just happened to be standing near where she was standing.

I don't know if my presence made any impact at all in eliminating anti-Semitism, but being there was good for me. It was so uplifting. To be a part of that crowd, taking a stand, instilled a sense of hope. As I look back at that, I realize I don't have to sit in front of the TV and be overwhelmed by the Herods and the forces of evil in the world. Just being there for something life-affirming can be transformational. When in doubt, just put your faith into action.

Whether it's intended by the author of Matthew's Gospel or not, I believe today's story invites the reader to make a choice. We are presented with two claims to the title: "King of the Jews." The first is Herod the Great. The second claim was that attributed to the little baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

The question to the first hearers of this story was, who will be the ruler over your life? To whom will you pledge your allegiance: the earthly ruler, Herod, with palace-fortresses everywhere, or this child born in an animal stable, because there was no place for him anywhere?

As soon as Herod heard that a child was born King of the Jews, he elicited the help of the chief priests and scribes of the people. They were willing to cooperate with Herod. They colluded with Rome as well, which is why Jesus clashed with them throughout his ministry.

They informed Herod that the ancient prophecy declared Bethlehem as the place out of which a ruler would come. So, Herod sent the Magi to Bethlehem to find the child. He also said that when they find him, to bring him word so he could go and pay homage himself, which we know was a lie.

This is what I love about the story. After seeing Jesus, offering their gifts, and worshipping him, the magi received a divine message in a dream not to return to Herod. Therefore, they changed their plan. They disobeyed Herod in order to be obedient to God.

We're told they returned to their own country by another road. I believe that is an indication, everything changed for the magi after they saw Jesus in Bethlehem. They couldn't return the same way they came.

I find this story really empowering, because if Jesus Christ is Lord of my life, I'm never powerless. I can say no to evil and destructive forces, the Herods of this world, in order to say yes to the way of Jesus Christ. That's how we affirm Christ is Lord. And it doesn't have to be dramatic. Sometimes it's just about showing up. It's about getting there.

So, whatever you're experiencing right now, whether you're anxious and fearful or disappointed about where you are in your life, or if you've gotten kind of comfortable and complacent or apathetic, when you see the star, that's the signal to leave where you are.

We are never powerless or helpless, because Jesus Christ is Lord. Christ is the light that came into the world and that light still shines.