

Count Your Kings

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Decatur, Georgia
January 17, 1991

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A Reading from the First Testament:

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street,
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coast lands wait for his teaching.*

Isaiah 42.1-4 (NRSV)

Before I read our New Testament lesson for today, allow me to confess that I am not happy to be here. Today is one of those days when I would gladly sit in a pew and allow somebody else to take the pulpit. I am not sure it is a day for words. If I had been asked to prepare a sermon for the occasion, I probably would have refused.

But here I am. This morning, when I reread what I had prepared for today, I found it strangely relevant. Therefore, by your leave, I shall simply read the Scripture lesson I had planned and deliver you the words I had planned--for the more I read those words in the context of the circumstances of the day, the more I become convinced that they are not only mine but have been given as a message to all of us.

A Reading from the New Testament: The reading comes from Matthew 2:1-12.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I know. I am a week and a half behind the Christian calendar. But that's alright. Historians are supposed to be a little out of date. In any case, I believe that this text is particularly relevant to us today, and that suffices.

As I was growing up, this was one of my favorite stories in the Bible. Favorite, not just because it was interesting but also because it was profitable. When this text was read in church, I knew I had something to look forward to.

You see, we didn't have Santa Claus (thank goodness!) But, we had the Three Kings. I left them straw for their camels, and they brought me presents. Nice arrangement. I never saw them, but they were very real. I remember waking up one morning with my uncle shouting, "There they go!" And the door slamming. And my uncle dashing out after them and I running to the window, only to see my uncle coming back around the corner, and hear him saying dejectedly, "Maybe next year."

But that was O.K. There were toys under my bed. I soon forgot that I had missed the Three Kings. Even my uncle did not seem too upset at his failure to catch them.

So, the text was good. It was good because it meant goodies.

Then the inevitable happened. I grew up. And I learned that there were no Three Kings.

Eventually, I even learned that the text does not call them kings and that it does not say that there were three.

Then, many years later, the text gained new meaning. It was at the time when Somoza still ruled in Nicaragua, and I read a report of a conversation about this text among some fisherfolk on Lake Managua. In that report, the conversation goes more or less like this:

"You know, those guys weren't all that smart. Can you imagine someone going to Managua and asking around, 'Hey, where is that new guerilla leader that has been born? We want to go join him?'"

"That's right," says another. "And then they even need a dream to tell them not to return to Herod. They sure aren't all that wise."

"Yeah, but read on," adds a third. "Look what happens next. The Holy Family has to go into exile. And then comes the slaughter of the innocents."

And then comes the clincher, a thoughtful, questioning voice: "I wonder how many innocents die as a result of star-gazing religion."

Now the text was no longer as nice as it used to be when I was a child. Now the text meant business. In a world of starving children, of landless peasants, of abused spouses, of wars and rumors of wars, how could I justify what I was doing? Perhaps I was not debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but I was debating whether what Athanasius meant by *homoousios* was exactly what the Council of Nicaea meant and how that differed from Basil the Great's interpretation. Others around me were debating exactly where the ancient borders of the tribes of Israel lay or the exact relationship between the Egyptian and the Western texts of the Book of Acts.

So, if I had preached about this text a year ago, I would have warned about star-gazing religion and star-gazing theology and would have used this text to support those who call for a reformation in our way of teaching and of doing theology. The problem, I would have said, is that like those magi of old, we are not sufficiently aware of the human and political situation around us. And so, as we follow our theological stars and seek ways to do him homage, the innocents die.

That was a year ago. Now I look at the text again, and notice that...

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "*

Do you see what is happening? It is not only Herod who is frightened. It is also "all Jerusalem with him." And what is Jerusalem? Jerusalem is the city of the Lord Yahweh. Jerusalem is the city of the Temple. Jerusalem is the epitome of the religion of Israel. Jerusalem is the religious establishment. The priests, and the scribes, and the theologians, and the biblical scholars, and the preachers. And they are frightened. The hope of Israel is being fulfilled ... and they, the theologians of Israel, are frightened.

Why? Because Jerusalem is not only the city of the Temple, and the priests, and the scribes, and the preachers, and the theologians. Jerusalem is also the city of Herod. Of Herod who built the Temple. Of Herod who killed a high priest and appointed another who was more willing to play footsie with him. Jerusalem is the city of a religious establishment joined to political power. The priests in Herod's Temple, and the scribes in Herod's Jerusalem, have no use for the prophecy of Isaiah:

*a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth.*

This does not mean they do not know their theology. They are theologians, alright, and they do have use for the prophecy of Micah: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah..." And so, the stupid, naive, star-gazing magi tell Herod when; but the wise, sophisticated, frightened, self-serving theologians tell him where.

Now I really dislike this text. Now it really means business. For, you see, the problem is that when I was a child, I thought that this was a story about three kings. But now I see that it is a story about two kings: *"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'"*

Ultimately, the reason why I now dislike this text is that I find it disturbingly relevant. I find it relevant because I belong to a church that has found its place in present-day Jerusalem, and I fear for its faithfulness and for my faithfulness. I find it relevant because as I see the modern-day Herods frightened by calls for peace and for justice, I also see myself tempted to join their fear and join their ranks and allow my theology to be used for their purposes. I find it relevant because I would very much like to be faithful to the King born in Bethlehem, who will not break a bruised reed, without arousing the suspicion of the kings of this world, who call us to justify and to sanctify war. I find it relevant and disturbing, because the King born in Bethlehem has stated it very clearly: "You cannot serve two masters."

I could go on. But I suspect the One who will not quench a dimly burning wick would simply have said: "Those who have ears, let them hear. "

Let us pray: Lord, we have pledged our lives to your service. But it is difficult to serve you in times such as these. The voices that would dispute your sovereignty are so loud and so convincing. The temptations are so subtle. The spirit of hatred and of vengeance so pervasive. In the midst of all that, we are supposed to speak your Word—to proclaim the absurd news that One who would not break a bruised reed is King. We know not how to do it. We cannot do it unless you are indeed our sovereign ruler. Be then the supreme and only ruler of our lives. For we ask it in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen