

Introduction:

The interesting thing about childhood, as I reflect back upon it, are how there are certain things that are fuzzy, at best, in my memory, and others that I will never forget. I can't remember all of the Christmas gifts that my parents bought for me over the years, even though they spent hundreds and hundreds of dollars on them, and I'm sure they were very well intentioned, and probably things I really enjoyed. But some stand out very clearly; I remember the year that I got rollerblades, which is a terrible Christmas gift, because it snows! And then you can't use them until the spring. I remember doing laps around our house in Westerville, gleefully taking in the three seconds it took to glide across the linoleum before I was once again forced to trudge through the carpet.

And I remember the year I got a remote controlled car. They had been playing the ads on tv for months. The car had two large back wheels so that you could drive it really fast in one direction, then jam the control sticks backwards and cause it to flip over. I was so excited to get to play with this toy. I ripped open the box took out the control put in the battery, and nothing happened. You see, the battery hadn't yet been charged. And if you know anything about those old remote controlled cars, you know that it takes an extremely long time to charge up the battery to full use: eight hours in fact, for about a 2 hour usage period. So I spent Christmas day in impatient anticipation of the time when this battery would finally be fully charged and I could take the car for a drive.

Batteries are a crucial part of the life-force of electronics. The car couldn't run without a battery. Our phones wouldn't work without batteries. They give juice and life to the object they are placed in. And you can't use the same batteries for everything. Double A won't work in a smoke detector, and a car battery won't work in a cell phone. We need to know what type of battery is needed in order to power our things.

There's something else, similar to a battery, from where people get their life force and direction: our thrones. Each of us has a throne in our lives. Like a battery, this is the place from where we get our power and our direction. It is on our thrones that the ruler of who we are and what we do is seated. Because of sin, we seat ourselves on the throne and all decisions then come from our thoughts and hearts to meet our hopes and desires. God calls us to step off of the throne and to allow him to be seated there. And this is the challenge of Christian discipleship: that we are in a constant struggle between God and our sin nature for authority in the throne of our lives.

In our story for today, we meet three characters and groups of characters, and we see the different ways in which they respond to the news that Jesus, the King of the Jews, is born. What we will discover is that their various responses are dictated by who each group is seeking to place on the throne of their lives. And as we discover how their thrones influence the way they respond to Jesus, we will look at our own throne and see, who is it that is really in control?

First, there is Herod: Herod's response to the news that the king of the Jews was to be troubled and eventually to lash out in violence. He was firmly planted on his own throne, and nobody, especially not a Jewish baby, was going to change that.

Second, there are the religious elite: Their response to Jesus was apathy. Herod called the chief priests and teachers of the law to help him understand the news he had received from the Magi about a Messiah. They recited to him Micah 5:2, that according to prophecy the Messiah was indeed supposed to be born in Bethlehem. But this is the last that we hear of them, until Jesus begins causing trouble for them as an adult. Though they were the most important religious leaders of the day, teaching texts that told of a coming Messiah, they weren't too interested in investigating this new claim. They would claim that God was seated on the throne of their lives, but ultimately it was their own esteem that they allowed to rule.

Finally, there are the Magi: Their response to Jesus was wonder and worship. They were seeking a savior to put on the thrones of their lives, which is why even though they weren't Jewish, they were willing to place faith in a prophecy of a different religion, travel many miles, and offer up expensive gifts at the feet of Jesus their Messiah.

Transition: Now, let's take a closer look at each character or groups of characters and discover the importance of having the right ruler on our thrones.

First, let's look a little closer at the character of Herod. Herod is an important character throughout the life of Jesus, from His birth to His death. But what you might not realize is that there was more than one Herod alive during Jesus' time. The Herods were a dynasty of rulers over Israel and Judea. They were, more or less middle managers of the land. They weren't the supreme rulers of the land, but through political wit, savvy, and a lot of murder, they were able to keep control of the region even when the region itself changed hands between various Caesars. Herod itself was a name given from grandfather to father to son to grandson, so it's can be a little confusing to know exactly who the Gospel writers were talking about because they mostly only used the proper name Herod. Based on the Gospel and historical records, it's possible that Jesus had contact with three different Herod's throughout his life.

According to Matthew, Jesus was born in 6 BC under the rule of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a ruler who worked extremely hard for his position in life. He became the military governor over the region of Galilee at the early age of 25. By leveraging his relationship with the Romans and Mark Antony specifically, he was given the title of Tetrarch, which basically mean that he was the ruler of a quarter of the kingdom. As I said earlier, Herod the Great was very smart in his relationships with the various powers around him. He knew who to befriend and what time, who to battle and at what time, and who to financially support and at what time. Besides cozying up with the Roman government, though not technically a Roman, he also wanted to gain some influence over the Jewish people.

Though not Jewish himself, he even paid for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, doubling the size of the temple mount, in order to appease the people that he ruled over.

But as he aged, Herod the Great became more and more anxious and concerned about keeping everything that he had gained for himself. He routinely changed his will, appointing new successors to the throne and even ended up executing his oldest three sons for trying to take his power. In 4 BC, after false rumors of Herod's death, Pharisees persuaded a group of kids to tear down a golden eagle that Herod had erected above the temple gates. When Herod heard what had happened, he had the youths that participated burned to death. According to Matthew, it was this Herod that Jesus was born under. Now Josephus, the primary Jewish historian from which scholars derive most of their information about Herod did not have a record of Herod's massacre of all male babies two and under in Bethlehem. However, it would make sense that Herod would do this, considering his increasingly violent and insane nature towards the end of his life.

Luke on the other hand, writes that Jesus was born under the rule of Herod Archelaus, Herod the Great's son, who was the one who instituted the census that called Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem. Now, while Archelaus' exploits weren't as explosive as his father, he was still known as a very violent man, even being brought before Caesar Augustus by both Jews and Samaritans and being accused of excessive brutality.

Regardless of whether Jesus was born under Herod the Great or Herod Archilaus, the point is the same; both rulers were fierce, violent men who were overly concerned with gaining more power and keeping the power that they had. Position, authority, and prestige were important to them. For all intents and purposes, they were the King over the Jews, though not part of the kingly line of David. They were seated firmly on their own thrones, and nobody was going to take that from them. And so their response to this possible king was to lash out violently.

Secondly, let's take a closer look at the characters of the religious elite.

In Matthew 2:3-6, we see Herod calling together the chief priests and teachers of the Jewish people to help him understand the news he had heard concerning this Jewish king. Herod was greatly disturbed and needed to know if what was being said could possibly be true. The Greek word used for calling together these leaders is the same word used later on in the Gospel when the Pharisees and leaders gathered together to plot against Jesus. This scene, then, is a foreshadowing of the sinister intent of the religious elite against the Messiah. The leaders then confirmed for him that there was prophecy in Micah that a King of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem.

So how did the religious elite respond to this news of a Messiah? They were more or less apathetic; they even helped Herod, whom they would have realized would not react well to this news, and then stood back and watched the chaos occur.

Now, to be fair, there were at the time many people claiming to be the Messiah, so it certainly could've been a "boy who cried wolf" sort of scenario. Yet surely it was not every day that foreign wise men came following astral signs looking for the King of the Jews. The leaders simply explained to Herod what they knew from Scripture, and then went back about their daily lives. And why on earth would they respond this way? Because of their thrones. They had forgotten what was really important in life; they had substituted the law for God. And they had substituted their own importance for being experts in the law for the importance of God's coming salvation to the people. Their thrones were a muddled mess of their own importance and false religion, and because of that, they couldn't see the good news that was happening right before them.

Finally, let's take a closer look at the characters of the wise men.

The wise men, or magi, were most likely Gentile astrologers who had been studying the stars, looking for signs that a great coming king would be born. Interestingly enough, there is another story in Roman history of magi seeking out a great king that was to be born by following the signs of the stars. About 30 years after Jesus' death, astrologers followed star signs to Rome to witness the birth of the Emperor Nero and to worship him as a great king. However, as we've talked about already, Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is full of allusions to the OT. The story of Gentiles being consulted by a pagan king who wants to destroy God's people would remind the Jewish people of Balaam in the book of Numbers, who was consulted by the

evil Balaak to carry out a plan against the Israelites. And in that story as well as this, God intervened and prevented the evil from being carried out. What's even cooler is that Balaam pronounced a prophecy about the coming of a king, using the symbol of a star. Numbers 24:17 says "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

So, these Gentile astrologers see a star in the sky, a sign that the king they were searching was born. They followed this sign to the region of Galilee, where they encounter Herod the Great, who seemed very interested in what they were saying. So interested, in fact, that he asks them to return to him after they have found this king to give him the details of the location, so that he too could go and worship him. But God intervenes in this story, sending them home by a different way.

What's so fascinating about the Magi as characters is how different their response is from Herod and the religious elite. Whereas Herod responded in fear and violence, they come in awe and wonder. Whereas the religious elite respond in apathy and even conspire with Herod against Jesus, they come in worship. What's even more incredible about their part in this story is that they weren't even Jewish, yet they came to worship the king of the Jews. Both Matthew and Luke tell stories of outsiders getting first row tickets to the birth of the savior. In Luke, the shepherds are visited by angels and given the privilege of seeing the baby messiah. In Matthew, Gentile astrologers are led to this Emmanuel, God with us. There is something so significant about God's revelation to these

characters that reveals to us that the Misseo Dei, Mission of God, is meant for all of humankind.

But why were these particular magi chosen by God to be able to discern the signs and be led straight to Jesus? They were searching for someone to sit on the throne of their lives. They spent their lives studying the charts and the skies, looking for the signs to lead them to a king to worship. They were dedicating themselves to what would turn out to be a religion they weren't a part of and a people that weren't theirs. But God, in his lovingkindness, would extend his kingdom outside of the Jewish people to the Magi because they were ready to seat Him on the throne of their hearts. In Isaiah 60:3, the prophet gives the people a window into the heart of God for all people, which is fulfilled in the coming of the Magi. "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Conclusion:

The birth of the king, and three responses. Herod responded with fear and violence because he wanted to keep the throne for himself. The religious elite responded with apathy because they were more concerned with religion and law and their own importance than with anticipating the coming Messiah. And the Magi responded with awe and worship because they were actively seeking to place the true king on the throne of their lives.

The ways in which these character's thrones effected their responses to Jesus reminds me of the parable of the Sower, found in Matthew 13:3-9 and 18-23.

³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear."

¹⁸ "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

Herod is like the seed who fell along the path. He heard the message from both the Jewish teachers and the Magi, but because his heart was hardened, the words were quickly snatched away. The chief priests and teachers of the law are like the seed that fell among the thorns. It grew into a plant, but the vitality of what that plant had to offer was quickly choked out by their dedication to the wrong things and their apathy to looking for the coming savior. The Magi were like the seed falling on good soil; because their thrones and hearts were prepared for a king, when they finally saw the signs, they were prepared to act by following the star and were rewarded with seeing the king.

So where do we fit into this story? Who is sitting on the throne of our lives? I think if we were to really think about it, at times we would be a little bit Herod, a little bit religious elite, and a little bit Magi. The battle for the throne of our lives is like the game king of the hill. In king of the hill, you and a group of friends surround a dirt or snow mound, snow was more fun because it hurt less. And the object of the game was to get to the top of the hill and hold your position by pushing and throwing the others down the hill. Like Herod, our selfishness sometimes sits on top of the hill, daring for anything to topple it. Like the religious elite, sometimes we just sit around and watch the battle happening, unwilling to do anything because we don't think it's really all that important. But sometimes, like the Magi, we allow God to push everything out of the way and truly rule from the throne of our lives.

Anabaptist Biblical scholar Matthew Gardner writes: “We live in a world in which various powers or structures exert sovereignty over our lives and clamor for our loyalty. We in turn must make decisions about what powers we will recognize and how much loyalty to offer them. To acclaim Jesus as king is to affirm that his sovereignty is ultimate, and that he has the first and final claim on our loyalties. That is what the homage of the magi is all about.”

Who sits on the throne of your hearts today? As you journeyed through this Christmas season, did you allow Jesus to capture your throne, or were you too consumed with other things? As you enter the new year, who will you let win king of the hill? The journey of the Christian life is that this will always be a struggle, but the hope is that as we grow closer to Christ, we allow Him to rule in our hearts more and more, stronger and stronger.