

**PERSPECTIVES:
THE ONE PERCENT
MATTHEW 2
DECEMBER 30, 2012**

A few years ago I served on a jury for a multi-million dollar civil case.

A well-to-do elderly lady made a verbal agreement with a contractor
to do some renovation and remodeling work on her house.

As that was drawing to a close,

she asked if he could do another project for her.

He agreed to it.

And another project, and another and another.

Her daughter, who lived a few miles away, started asking questions,
and even tried to intervene and stop the contractor.

But he insisted he was hired by her mother, not by her.

More projects, more errands, more monthly payments adding up.

Eventually, the lady died, and the contractor went on to other jobs.

The daughter, going through her mother's papers,

was horrified to find her mother had paid out *millions* of dollars to the contractor
over several years.

There was no written contract, just a verbal agreement.

The draw notices, the monthly bills, were often vague and lacking receipts.

They included gas, mileage, expenses and

high wages for skilled construction workers running personal errands

like picking up her mother's laundry and doing grocery shopping,

and even a bill for an order for fine steaks shipped in from out of state.

As if they could get steaks better than we have here in Texas!

Eventually, the daughter filed suit,

claiming the contractor took advantage of an elderly lady

who had lots of money but perhaps not all of her faculties.

It was fascinating to listen to the daughter's lawyer and the contractor's lawyer arguing the case.

Both sounded so convincing,

but their perspectives were so different,

you might assume they were talking about two different sets of circumstances.

And we had to take all that into a room and make a decision.

Guess who was voted to be the jury foreman?

It was an interesting couple of days

sorting out facts from those two very different perspectives.

Through the Advent season, leading up to Christmas,

we've been looking at the Christmas story from a variety of perspectives.

The stars looking down from heaven,

the poor, hungry, and unemployed,

a very surprised Joseph who becomes an unexpected daddy,

the innkeeper who had no room for Jesus,

and the shepherds who were the first to come see the newborn baby.

Today we're taking another and very different angle on the Christmas story.

This is the perspective of those at the top of the food chain,

those who have the lion's share of wealth and power in society.

In the last year or so we've heard them labeled the "One Percent."
 First, we're going to see the birth of Jesus from the perspective of King Herod.

MATTHEW 2

This is the story that's never told in the children's Christmas pageant.

Oh, we see shepherds and wise men come to see baby Jesus.

Luke tells us about shepherds coming immediately.

Matthew tells us about wise men coming maybe a couple of years later.

And the children's pageant shows them both at once,

if there are enough terrycloth bathrobes to go around for costumes.

But when was the last time you saw the pageant include

King Herod anxious and plotting,

and his men killing baby boys around Bethlehem?

It's a disturbing episode, probably not really suitable for a children's production.

It's PG-13 at best.

But it's real, it's in the Bible, and it's got something to say to us.

Among many possible points of interest, I think the primary point of the story is this:

Those in power, privilege, comfort, those who have recently been called "the one percent,"
 may feel threatened by Jesus.

If they really understand him,

if they understand he really claims all authority,
 even above their own,

and they know he requires our full devotion and highest loyalty,
 above and beyond loyalty to themselves

above and beyond holding onto their comfort, power and wealth,
 they may feel threatened by him.

They might want to get him out of their hair.

King Herod was a one-percenter who definitely fit this description.

King Herod ruled with an iron fist,

and no one would dare question or challenge him.

But then he was shaken by the birth of Jesus.

The root of the Greek word translated "shaken" is the root word for an earthquake.

The very foundation of the earth became unsteady for King Herod
 when he heard about the birth of Jesus.

He is "born king of the Jews."

Herod had clawed his way to power,

using political cunning and cutthroat ruthlessness to get there.

But they're talking about someone *born* king of the Jews.

He knew that meant someone from the line of King David.

Someone others might call "God's messiah."

One *born* king of the Jews.

King Herod may have understood this better and taken it more seriously than you and I.

We do not live in a place where kings rule.

We use the title "Lord" Jesus like it's the religious way to say "Mr." Jesus.

But to say "Jesus is Lord" or "one born king of the Jews" has serious implications.

It means he's the one who is in charge of my life.

In charge of the entire universe, but specifically of my life.

He sets the bar for what is right, good and true.

There is no "what's true for me"

There is no "do what's right for you."

It's not about what I like or I want.

In fact, it's not about me at all.

It's all about HIM.

If I say it and mean it that Jesus is Lord,
 my life, my love and devotion, my efforts, my desires, my taste,
 my money, my work, my family, every breath I take,
 all are subordinated to Him.

It's ALL about Him.

Think for a moment about the things you'll be involved in this week.

A New Year's Eve party, going back to work or school,
 interacting with your family, grocery shopping,
 driving in San Antonio traffic,
 and all the rest.

Will that all be subordinated to the Lordship of Jesus?

All of it?

If that makes you a little uncomfortable,
 because you're used to being in charge of your own life,
 think of how that went over with King Herod,
 who was used to being in charge of his entire kingdom.
 Herod and all Jerusalem were shaken, upset, frightened, angry, and lashing out.

Every year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,
 there is displayed, beneath the great Christmas tree,
 a beautiful eighteenth century nativity scene.

The usual characters are all there:

the shepherds and magi, Joseph; Mary; the babe –
 all are there, each figure artistically beautiful.

But there is something surprising about this scene, something unexpected here,
 something easily missed by the casual observer.

The stable, and the shepherds, and the cradle
 are set, not in the little village of Bethlehem,
 but among the ruins of mighty Roman columns.

The fragile manger is surrounded by broken and decaying columns.

The artists knew the meaning of this event:

The gospel, the birth of God's new age, was also the death of the old world.

The Herods of the world know in their souls what we may have passed over too lightly:

God's presence in the world means finally the end of their own power.
 So they seek not to celebrate the birth of God's new age, but to crush it.

Herod responded to Jesus like modern totalitarian governments do.

Squash any rival claim to authority.

Silence any challenge to state control.

There's a reason communist and Muslim governments do all they can to
 control and suppress Christianity and the Church.

Their ideologies and systems are built on the premise of
 the subjugation of individuals and individual rights and freedoms
 to the interests of the whole,
 represented by the state, whether communist or Islamist.

So China has a state approved Protestant denomination
 and a state approved Catholic denomination.

Not only state approved, but state controlled.

And they are brutal toward the unofficial, underground churches.
North Korea does not even have state controlled churches.

They allow no church whatsoever,
aside from one or two “show churches”
for foreign visitors to see.

What real church there is in North Korea is secret and underground.
Christians living under Islamic authoritarian regimes face real persecution.

Many end up in prison or dead.
Those Christians need our prayers.
Authoritarian regimes want total control.

They’re not interested in any separation and balance of powers
or individual rights and freedoms.

They do not want any questions asked,
and certainly no challenges from prophetic voices who serve a higher power.

King Herod and those on the top of the heap, the ones with comfort, power and wealth,
generally do not want anyone upsetting the order of things.

The status quo is just fine, thank you.

I wonder how much that love of the comfortable status quo
has trickled down into our lives.

But that’s not true of all one-percenters.

The magi were also one-percenters.

Oh, they might not have been as financially rich as Herod.

But they did quite well, maybe as *two*-percenters.

You can tell by the expensive gifts they brought to baby Jesus.

And they were certainly powerful.

They were often employed as advisors to kings,
because they were believed to have wisdom and guidance from
astrology, tea leaves, tarot cards,
all sorts of magic and divination.

Think Merlin the Magician, Merlin the Magi.

They also read the scriptures of many different peoples, many different religions.

Anything and everything to search out secret or spiritual wisdom.

These particular magi may have run across the Old Testament scriptures

telling about a star marking the coming of God’s messiah. (Nu.24:17)

So when they saw the star, they packed up and headed to Jerusalem.

Their assumption was that if God was raising up a king for the Jewish people,
he’d surely be doing it in the capital city.

They discovered, through the Bible scholars in Jerusalem, that God had other plans.

Not Jerusalem,

but an obscure little one-donkey town called Bethlehem.

That didn’t fit the usual model.

But, being more interested in seeking truth than in arguing for their own presumptions,
they headed off to Bethlehem.

They probably did not know that

Bethlehem was the town where King David had grown up,
and was the town from which the Jews expected

God’s messiah to come.

I find it disturbing that the Bible scholars had all the answers right,
they knew where he would be,

but they did not go out of their way to see him.
 The magi might not know it all,
 but they gave great effort and time to
 finding him, bringing him gifts, and worshiping him.
 First the magi followed the light of the star to Judea,
 and then they followed the light of Scripture and the star to Bethlehem.
 It wasn't their nation or their home town,
 and it wasn't the way they expected it to be.
 But it was where the truth of God led them.
 So they went.

When they finally found Jesus,
 there was joy,
 and then bowing before him as if he was a king.
 They worshiped him.
 They gave him very expensive gifts,
 not pocket change or leftovers, but very pricey stuff,
 gifts suggesting they had some significant insights into who Jesus is.
 Gold, a gift traditionally given to kings.
 Frankincense, burned in the flame as a sacrifice.
 And myrrh, a spice used to anoint bodies for burial.

And because God's angel warned them about Herod's evil intention,
 they went home without telling him where to find this one born king of the Jews.
 These one-or-two-percenters got it right.

For Herod, the gospel is news too bad to be endured.

For Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and magi,
 it is news too good to miss.

So what about us?

When we take seriously the Lordship of Jesus,
 do we respond like the magi or like King Herod?

Do I want to surrender to Jesus my *entire* life?

What about your politics?

Did Jesus and the things he stands for influence your voting last month?
 Or was it more about party and personality?

How about your money?

When there's talk in church about what the Bible says about money and giving,
 do you skip those Sundays?

Or do you think and pray about how you might
 honor Christ and bless others

through your financial stewardship?

How about your sexuality?

The way you treat your coworkers?

How you act at school?

How about your whole life?

Sometimes we think of different parts of our lives as slices of a pie,
 and Jesus is one of those slices.

But to say "Jesus is lord" means the whole pie belongs to him.

Is Jesus your lord?

A sociology professor every year begins his course on "The Family"

by reading to his class a letter from a parent, written to a government official.

In the letter the parent complains that his son,
once obedient and well-motivated,
has become involved with some weird new religious cult.
The father complains that the cult has taken over the boy's life.
They've persuaded his son to
forsake all of his old friends for new friends in the cult,
and has even got him to believe against his own family's traditions.

After reading the letter, the professor asks the class to
speculate what the father is talking about.

Almost without exception, the class immediately assumes that
the subject of the letter is a teen or young adult mixed up with
the "Moonies," or some other controversial group.

After the class puts out all of the possible conclusions they can think of,
the professor surprises them by revealing that
the letter was written by a third century father in Rome,
the governor of his province,
complaining about this weird religious group called "The Christians."

Is Jesus so much in charge of your life that he makes you different from the world around you?
So much so that others would notice?

Are you following the way of the magi,
who gave considerable time, effort and riches, and in fact, altered the course of their lives,
expressing devotion to Jesus?

Or do you relate to King Herod,
who wanted to keep Jesus from messing up a comfortable situation?