

Sermon Text for Christmas Eve December 24, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Micah 5:2-5a and Matthew 2:1-12 *“Jesus is born”*

Welcome to Christmas Eve. There are traditions at this church that have been in place for a long time. Many of you, maybe even most of you, have worshipped here long before I got here. We have a tradition of decorating the church and making it look spectacular. Whitney Sickler and Maggie Nadu have taken on that mantle. We have had the pageant which forever was directed by Jean Pontz and others and now Beth Feiler and Ali Elias have taken on that mantle. The old traditions continue through you.

We have begun new traditions with pieces of the manger scene made by a member of the church, Jeff Stoltzfus, who has agreed to do it for the next 50 years so we are in good shape there. This year it was a cow that would be placed around the nativity scene. The birth of our Savior Jesus Christ is at the center of all that we do this evening, and all that we do here in the life of the church as well. I mentioned that for three successive worship services, last Sunday, this evening, and next Sunday in a few days the sermon title will be: Jesus is born. We will be looking at different Scriptures in Matthew, but we will be seeing the impact that Jesus has on individuals and society and culture in three different stories.

Last week we saw that the quiet birth of Jesus had an impact on the forgiveness of our sins, since he was called Jesus purposefully to reflect that God saves us from our sin. Tonight Jesus is born and forces us to make a decision much like the decisions that faced Herod and the three magicians, or wise men, or kings, I'm okay with any of that. Herod became afraid because Jesus was born and felt threatened and looked to do all within his power to maintain that which he was used to doing, the status quo, which kept him as the decision maker in his life. The wise men were willing to leave their homes, go into the unknown, and risk all of it and the result of utter joy at being witnesses to the newborn king, which changed their lives forever. We have that same choice this evening. Let's read.

READ

This second story of the birth of Jesus takes us away from the quietness that is reflected in the end of Matthew which has the birth of Jesus as almost an offhanded comment. We see these magicians who are central to the story appear. The reason I call them magicians is because the term that is used in the Greek is magoi which is used one other time in the Bible, that is in

Acts 13:6,8, and clearly this person is a magician. I know it sounds strange to portray these traditional kings as travelling circus magicians, but that's what the Bible kinda says they are.

What we do know from this Scripture is that they came from the East, so probably from Babylon where there was still a large Jewish community in Jesus' day, and that they followed a star, because they said that they did. This is why some consider them to be astrologers as well. They arrive in Jerusalem, which is the main city in that region and the capital as well and they are looking for answers because this star meant that a king somewhere was born. Bethlehem was only 5 miles away from Jerusalem, so they were close in this story.

They clearly represent that population of people who are outside of the people of God. They are not considered to be Jewish and they would be considered gentiles, or outside of this plan of God which encompasses the people of God in covenant and grace. They are those who are foretold in Isaiah 60:3 – Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. These foreign powers that have come to worship God, but are outside of the covenant community. The nonbelievers. Philippians 2:10-11 predicts this when Paul states – so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the God the Father. This is what these magicians are living out in their lives.

Herod, well, he is called a king, one of two kings mentioned in this story of Jesus is born. Jesus is the second King, and he is described by the magicians as King of the Jews, not the King of Israel. A spiritual king as opposed to a political one. And that title, King of the Jews, follows Jesus to the cross where Pilate puts above the cross, This is the king of the Jews. His very birth foretells his death. As a result of the presence of the wise men and the understanding that a king has been born Herod greets that news with fear, and gathering his people around him to secure some answers and to get some security on his future. The wise men see Jesus and react with unspeakable joy. Herod hears news of the birth of Jesus and reacts with fear, and paranoia.

What brings fear into your life? What do you stay up at night worrying about, or what causes you to be anxious throughout the day? How do you deal with the future of your children? How do you approach a new medical reality that will change your life, and not for the better? Do financial needs become a weight upon your shoulders that you no longer want to carry? Does your safety and the safety of your loved ones concern you? How many of these things are we willing to face head on from a faith perspective, or do we just follow the normal course of action and try to maintain the status quo around us which is familiar and safe? When we hear

that Jesus is born, is there any movement of the needle in our lives from self-sufficiency to complete surrender to the newborn king?

When we hear this evening that Jesus is born I want us to recognize that this statement, this actual fact, the birth of Jesus, forces us to choose, we aren't able to just come here this evening and leave unaffected. In vs. 10 we read that when the magicians recognize where they are, that they are overwhelmed with joy. There are three words that mean greater and greater here. They had decided to take a risk and left their families, left their country, went into the unknown, even the dangerous in search of what God has in store for them. They chose to listen to God's voice and followed his light to wherever it led them. They were willing to do that. They chose to follow and were rewarded with unspeakable joy.

Herod, the foil to the magicians here, who was actually part of the Jewish people, he was considered part of the people of God. He had all the right people around him, the priests and the religious leaders. He would have represented the church and all of its power and all of its influence in society and culture, and so had all of the right answers. He heard about the breaking into history this new king, and he is filled with fear. There is only one king, it is up to us to maintain the status quo. We have to do all that is possible to keep our way of life in control and in place.

For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our king and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects the right to rule by that king. There is a clear distinction between the overwhelming joy that the wise men experience and the fear that Herod experiences. The birth of Jesus creates this choice in how we react.

Tonight you have chosen, you have made the decision to be here. Now, the rest of your life unfolds before you. It is not too late to choose to follow Jesus and leave behind the fear that comes with trying to maintain control of your own life, which is a guaranteed losing battle. Choose to follow Jesus and it will lead not to safety, certainly not to control, but it will lead to what we find in vs.5 of Micah, the one of peace. And who doesn't want that? Amen.