
Star Stalkers

Matt 2:1-12

Sermon preached by Luke A. Powery on January 6, 2013 at Duke Chapel

Once upon a time, there was a king. He wanted to last forever and be like the Energizer bunny and keep going and going and going. He was named king of Judea by the Roman Senate and ruled Jewish Palestine for over thirty years. He was wealthy, politically savvy, extremely loyal to Rome, and remained in good standing with successive Roman emperors. He was connected and knew how to network. With his imperial position, came great power and he loved it. He levied heavy taxes on the citizens and resented that many Jews considered him a usurper of power. Because of this, he feared uprisings throughout his reign. He was constantly paranoid, even of his own family. No one was going to steal his stardom. When he was sick in later years, his fears only increased. Fears were his food day and night. With these fears, he became crueler, leading to the execution of his own wife and at least two of his sons. Let's just say he wasn't a family man. He trusted no one and no one trusted him. He saw himself as a star of sorts and no one and nothing was going to mute his thunder or dim his glory or his light. This king was none other than King Herod so when Matthew begins with "in the time of King Herod" he is warning us that there are many dangers, toils, and snares on the horizon of this biblical story. A time of *tremendum*. A time of terror. In the old Homeland Security Advisory System, it was threat level red.

What Herod didn't realize though was that he was a falling star. I'm no astronomer by any means, but in the physical makeup of the universe there are falling stars or shooting stars that are streaks of light you can sometimes see in the night sky. They're caused by tiny bits of dust and rock called meteoroids falling into the Earth's atmosphere and burning up. The short-lived trail of light the burning meteoroid produces is called a meteor. Meteors are commonly called falling stars or shooting stars. Falling stars may produce some light but they are short-lived and eventually burn up. They don't last forever. But Herod didn't understand this. He desired eternal, infinite, luminous glory and thought he would shine forever as king. But he was a falling star.

When the wise men, the astrologers from the East, came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage," Herod did not do the happy dance. Instead, "he was frightened." Why would he be fearful? Joy to the world the Lord is come! He was afraid because there was now another king in town, a child-king who was the light of the world, the light of lights, shining brighter than any star. Herod was a falling star but he wrongly assumed he was a rising star. But only God's royal incarnate epiphany is resurrection light and splendor. Another shining king was a threat to Herod's kingdom. This baby king was a negation of his kingship. Another king would mean that life, as he knew it, would have to change. Another king would mean he would have to give up what he had gained and what he had worked so hard for. He had worked too hard for his star power. The birth of the Christ-child, the king of the Jews, meant the death of Herod's stardom. Christ's birth was his death thus he saw Jesus's birth as a loss of control and power. He wouldn't be able to run his own kingdom anymore. He wouldn't be able to run his own life anymore. He would have to give up being in charge and ruling from his own personal throne. He would have to follow the agenda of Jesus and not vice versa. In other words, his world would have to die.

So what happens? Herod is fenced in by fear and fueled by it. Fear can create paralysis but fear can also blind rationality and lead one to attempt to do the unthinkable—in this case, kill sweet little Jesus boy born in a manger, God's salvific answer for the world. Herod wants to know where the baby is in order to destroy him, though he says otherwise. In a dream the wise men are warned not to return to Herod and Joseph is told to flee to Egypt because of Herod's evil motives. Herod becomes so cocoo for cocoa cocoa puffs, so nuts, so crazy, that he orders all children under the age of two to be killed—the ancient massacre of innocents predated the Sandy Hook Elementary one. Herod becomes a star stalker for the wrong reason—to snuff out the world's

candle of hope. To do harm. Not to pay homage. To take something from Jesus—his very own life, and to place a mocking banner on the manger with the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “God is dead.”

Why would someone want to do this to Jesus? Isn’t his birth supposed to be good news for the whole wide world? Aren’t we supposed to have Epiphany parties, drink and be merry? I’m not trying to psychologically analyze Herod’s irrationality but I can see why there may be some grieving when Jesus comes into the world. In his poem, “The Journey of the Magi,” T.S. Eliot writes with the voice of one of the magi who remembers the journey,

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

This poem suggests that when the life and light of Christ is born into the world, it means the death of the world, as we know it, the death of our world and our way of being and living. It was “bitter agony” for Herod who wanted to clutch to himself as god. But the beginning of God incarnate in Bethlehem was Herod’s end. The birth of Jesus is a beginning but it is also an end, our end as well. “All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born”(Howard Thurman).

There are different responses to the birth of Jesus. Some will grieve and fear. But despite the acknowledgement of death at this birth, the wise men were “glad” unlike Herod. They stalked the star because of an overwhelming sense of joy. They were not jealous like Herod. The presence of Jesus invoked a deep experience of joy. These wise men, astrologers, or magi, came from the East to pay the Messiah homage. Matthew does not tell us if there were three of them or that they were even kings. We know that on their journey, “A hard time [they] had of it” but they wanted to give something to Jesus, not take anything away from him. They weren’t asking him to answer a prayer or to give direction for their lives or to help them win the lottery. They searched for Jesus in order to worship him at the heavenly altar of the earthly manger. They didn’t try to hold on to their past or their possessions or their pedigree. They were glad for their spiritual death because in contradiction to Herod’s philosophy, God was alive. Incarnate joy had entered the world and their joy overflowed into the giving of gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. No strings attached. Gifts, as one commentator notes, that represented the tools of trade thus giving these tools was a sign of giving up their past way of living for a new way of living. They were “no longer at ease...in the old dispensation.” Everything old had passed away, and everything had become new (2 Cor 5:17)! They offered their livelihood. They offered themselves. Astrology bowed to incarnate theology. They had nothing to lose but everything to gain. The King of kings they had been waiting

for had finally arrived. They searched. They stalked the star until they found the savior. On that day, they died, but on that day, they lived. “I should be glad of another death.”

I realize that not everyone searches for Jesus. I realize that there are some who are antagonistic or at least apathetic toward Jesus. I realize that not everyone is in the Christian camp so to speak. I realize that in an age of secularism and pluralism there are numerous options in the marketplace of religious ideas. I get this, but I’m not really talking about religion this morning. I’m talking about Jesus, the divine-human person, God-in-the-flesh, a child yet born a king whose throne is a lowly manger. And the reality is, wherever you find yourself on the journey, people are searching, longing, looking for something or someone to fill the void in their lives—relationships, academic studies, sports, work, community service, drugs, alcohol. Who or what are you searching for? To use the title of a book by religious historian, Leigh Schmidt, society is full of “restless souls.”

Maybe you are restless and are searching for Jesus. If so, why are you searching for him? Is it to get or to give? Why do you pray to him? Why do you sing to him? Why do you talk about him? Why are you searching for him?

It is the end of Christmastide but the beginning of a new year. An end that is a beginning. The birth of the Christ-child is a beginning and an end. His birth is our death but as the poem declared, “I should be glad for another death.” Why? Because in your search for Jesus, as you follow the star of Jesus, when you find Jesus, you’ll find life everlasting. You’ll recognize that the One we’ve been waiting for has finally come. He might not be in the form you expect but he is everything you need. He comes with a light so bright in the dark dungeon of human brokenness. Brighter than any morning star, brighter than the sunshine of the day, brighter than the brightest moonlight of the night. God’s daystar. The light of God shining in the darkness. The light of the world illuminating from a manger stall. The warm brilliance of the Christ-child lures us with love and light. He lies in a manger but he still searches our hearts. We may be searching for him but he is a shepherd who hunts for lost sheep. Are you lost? He’s searching for you. We may bear gifts of worship each Sunday but we receive God’s greatest gift to us—God’s promise to be with us, Emmanuel. We may not give in order to get, but in our giving we receive. Why are you searching for Jesus?

At the Bethlehem manger, we receive love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We receive nourishment for our restless souls on the journey. This Christ-child, born in Bethlehem, literally the “house of bread,” in a manger, a feedbox for animals, is the Bread of Life for the world. Our daily bread. He will quench your hunger and thirst. He not only puts food on the table; he is the food on the table. Jesus will fill the void in your life as you search for him, stalking the star to find him. Seek and you will find. Though he lies in a manger, he holds us in the palm of his hands and rocks us in the cradle of his love. His warm light of life ignites a fire of joy in our hearts because he is not just born in Bethlehem, he is born in our hearts that we might live again, that we might shine for him. “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Christ’s light illuminates the windows of our hearts that we may radiate his love in the world. “Jesus is... the star divine” living in us so “walk in the light, beautiful light, come where the dewdrops of mercy shine bright. Oh shine all around us by day and by night, Jesus is the light of the world.” At his birth, we die. At his birth, we live.

Once upon a time, there was a king. His name was Jesus, the rising star. And guess what? Unlike Herod, he lasts forever.