

The Three Kings

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Date: 14 December 2014

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[0 : 0 0] Father, we thank you for your word, that we can feast on it each week as we come here at Red, and we pray that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts to it, open our minds to it, and that we will come away worshipping the true King, Jesus. Amen.

Well, some of you may have seen tonight's title and been thinking in your head, I hope Mark's not referring to the three wise men or magi. He must know that there's no basis for that in the Bible.

The carol, we three kings, you know, that's made up from dinner. That the magi weren't kings, just astronomers. And if we look at the Bible, there's no mention of three of anything.

And the number probably comes from the number of types of gifts that they gave to Jesus, you know, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Well, if you're thinking that in your head, you'd be glad to know that that's not why I've chosen the title.

Yes, I do realize that the magi aren't kings, and yes, we don't know how many there were. In fact, given how far they came, it's more than likely that they would have come in a large contingent, and given the impact that they had when they arrived in Jerusalem.

[1 : 1 7] But I still want to contend that there are three kings in this passage, and so the title of the talk is appropriate. And so you might wonder, who are these three kings?

And some of you may already have clues as to who they might be. But let's look at the passage together, why don't we? Well, the first king should be pretty obvious. His name, his name as such, any guesses?

King Herod, yes. So it says in verse 1 that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi from the east came to Jerusalem.

Now, in those days, it was common to mark time according to the reign of kings, and so it was during the reign of Herod that Jesus was born. And when the magi came to Jerusalem, it sort of made sense that their first port of call would be to King Herod.

And perhaps they thought it was his son that was going to be born king, and that was where the star was pointing to. But as we read the rest of the story, we'll find that Herod is what I want to call a pretend king.

[2 : 2 5] So yes, he has all the trappings of a king, a palace, an entourage of advisors, chief priests to advise him, but he's not the real thing. He's a pretend king. Now, why is that?

Well, first, we know that actually Herod wasn't a Jew. He was an Edomite, or someone who's an Edomite, descended from the line of Esau. And his rule was only made possible by the Romans who installed him.

So he wasn't really a king, just sort of in a sense a governor. But he gave himself that title. And as we shall see, he was actually very paranoid and afraid that somebody else will come to take his throne.

He was paranoid by his rivals. So that's the first thing. But second, Herod is a pretend king because that's his nature. He only pretends to want to know where Jesus is.

He's pretending or lying when he says that he wants to worship the king of the Jews. So he says in verse 8 to the Magi, Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I may go and worship him.

[3 : 32] But we know that's a lie, don't we? We know that what he really wants to do is to find Jesus so that he can kill him. And in next week's passage, if you come back next week, we'll see his cruelty where he kills off the boys in Bethlehem, all those under two, when he fails to find Jesus.

But third and most importantly, Herod was only a pretend king because of what the prophecy says. So in verse 6, which is the key, I think, to unlocking the whole story, the reference in Micah foretells a time when God will appoint a ruler.

A king over his people Israel. And we usually focus on the birthplace of Bethlehem, and rightly so because that's where the ruler must be born. But there's actually another more important detail in the prophecy.

Look at the end of verse 6 with me. I'll read the whole verse. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler, and here's the important detail, who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

So Herod's a pretend king because the true king of Israel will shepherd Israel. He will protect and care for the people, which is exactly what Herod does in his reign.

[4 : 47] The opposite, sorry, the exact opposite of what Herod does in his reign. If you read the historian, the Jewish historian Josephus, he'll give you many accounts of the terror, the systematic terror that Herod applied to his reign.

He eradicated his rivals. He searched out most of the prominent Jews of the time, potential heirs to his throne, and got rid of them. And here in this chapter, next week, we shall see that innocent boys are being killed, just so that he could protect his throne.

So Herod, therefore, is no shepherd of his people, is he? He was a tyrannical pretend king, which is the exact opposite to our second king.

Now, I'm not going to ask you to guess because there's no surprises, but our second king is Jesus. And unlike Herod, Jesus is the true king. Now, how can we tell this?

Well, first of all, we saw last week, because of Jesus' genealogy. He was the son of Abraham, the son of David, and therefore the Messiah, the rightful king, as promised by God.

[5 : 51] But here in this passage, we see more of why he is the true king. Secondly, Jesus is the true king because, just like the prophecy said, he was born in Bethlehem. But more importantly, unlike Herod, Jesus is the true king because he was a shepherd over Israel.

So do you remember how Jesus described himself in John chapter 10? I'll put the verse up on the slide. He says, I am the good shepherd, verse 11. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, and when he sees the wolf coming, unlike the hired hand, he does not abandon his sheep and run away.

And then recall the parable of the lost sheep, which Jesus told. Jesus is the shepherd who leaves the 99 to find and save the one that's lost.

And so this is exactly what Jesus will grow up to do. He will lay down his life for the lost, for all of us. He will shepherd his people. Herod tries to secure his throne by killing people, but Jesus does it by dying for them.

And so the Magi got it right. They were overjoyed when they found Jesus in verse 10. And they bowed down and worshipped him, verse 11. And they opened treasures and presented him with gold, incense, and myrrh.

[7 : 15] These are gifts that are only fit for a king. The Magi worshipped the right king, the true king. They defied the pretend king by not returning to tell him where Jesus was.

Now there's one more king in the story. And he too is the king of the Jews. And funnily enough, his name doesn't appear at all in this passage.

But we discover who he is, again from verse 6. Because he's the one who speaks in verse 6, who declares the birthplace of this ruler, this shepherd who will shepherd his people.

Out of you will come a ruler, he says, who will be the shepherd of my people, Israel. So the one who's speaking says that this Israel is my people. He is the king of the Jews.

Of course, this person is none other than God himself, the God of Abraham, the God of David, the king of Israel. Israel is his people, remember? He says that time and time again in the Old Testament, I will be your God, and you will be my people.

[8 : 23] But God is not just the king of the Jews. He's also the king over all creation. He's the one with mastery over the entire creation, so that he's able, for example, to cause the star to appear and then to move over Bethlehem.

He's the one who intervenes in the dreams of the Magi, so that he is able to stop them from returning to Herod. All his plans come to pass because he's the sovereign lord of history.

And all along, his plan was to save his people. And now he does that by sending his son, Jesus, the shepherd of his people. So he's our third king. I find it so heartwarming and a bit ironic that 2,000 years ago, when Jesus was born, this helpless baby in this small city of Bethlehem, in a far-flung outpost of the Roman Empire, people were marking time by this local tyrant, Herod.

But guess what happens now, more than 2,000 years later? Who are we now marking time by? Not just in the city of Bethlehem, but across the entire world.

We're marking time by the birth of Jesus, aren't we? It's 2014 A.D. Anno Domino, the year of the Lord. And whether people believe in Jesus or not, we're marking time to this true king.

[9 : 50] Not just the king of the Jews, but the king of the whole world. And sure, if you are really pedantic, some 6th century monk got it wrong. And so Jesus wasn't actually born in 0 BC, he was either 4 or 6 BC, he got a few years out.

And yes, there's now a push, so that people don't want to call it A.D., they want to call it C.E., common era. But there's no getting past that fact, isn't it? That the reference point is Jesus' birth.

The world is now marking time to the human reign of the true king, Jesus. And that's really comforting for me because, as most of you will know, there's a concerted push at the moment, isn't it, in Australia to try and push Jesus out of the public square, to dethrone him, as it were, in Australian society, to make him just one of many religious figures.

And I suppose in an increasingly pluralistic world, society, that's probably inevitable. And if you're a Christian, you may find it threatening, where increasingly in the media, Jesus is often mocked, Christians are ridiculed, and it may cause you to wonder if Jesus' kingship is secure.

Well, friends, be assured of this, Jesus' kingship does not depend on the number of people who worship him. Jesus' kingship is not threatened by how many people actually follow him.

[11 : 20] He has been king the very day he was born. And he's as much king today as he was then. Even though when he was born, only a few foreign magi actually worshipped him.

And yet he was still king. And God, the king in heaven, continues to reign over history. Directing the affairs of men. Nothing that pretend kings might want to do can change that fact.

So there's no need to fear. God's kingship, Jesus' kingship, is secure whatever happens in this world. Whatever humans may do. There's actually a rather surprising detail in our passage tonight, and it's in verse 3.

I just want you to look at it with me. Look at what it says. It says, When King Herod heard this, and that is heard about the star and the birth of the king, he was disturbed, or alarmed, or distressed.

But then it goes on to say, So was all Jerusalem with him. Now that's, to me, that's a bit surprising because it's clear why Herod would be alarmed. That's the rival in, on the, you know, potential rival for his throne.

[12 : 26] But why would the rest of Jerusalem be? After all, wouldn't they be happy to see the back of this tyrannical ruler? Wouldn't they be rejoicing with the hope of a new king? Well, I think they would.

Except, that the news of a rival king was actually bad for them because they had seen what Herod had done before. They were afraid of what he would do. All the reprisals.

That he would be hunting out people to kill them. Taking, you know, potential rivals out of the scene. That was what they were afraid of. And that was why they were distressed. And so this is what happened, I think, that they allowed the fear, their fear of King Herod to overwhelm their joy for a Messiah.

They could have welcomed and worshipped Jesus just like the Magi did. But instead, they chose to live in fear of Herod. They feared the pretend king rather than rejoice at the coming of a true king.

Now, we may not have obvious pretend kings like Herod's in our lives today. But I guess the question for us is this. Do we also have other pretend kings in our lives?

[13 : 43] People or things that stop us from truly following Jesus because we're afraid of them. So much so that we stop stepping out in faith for God.

Whether it's at work or school, we're afraid of the opinion of others ahead of Jesus. We're threatened to live openly and authentically as Christians because we fear, for example, we might lose our jobs or we might lose friendships, whatever.

Or perhaps our fears are more general than that. We fear, we look at the cost of living and what the TV keeps saying all the time is going up, up, up, property prices. And so our pretend king is the economy and it shapes all our decisions, all our priorities in life, all our choices are making us choose to safeguard ourselves against the economy.

So much so that it stops us from trusting in Jesus and living for him, being generous, spending time in ministry rather than working, for example.

Who are our pretend kings? Friends, I want to just encourage us tonight to know that we don't need to be afraid because we don't only just have a king who's promised to shepherd us, to care for us, to care for us, to provide for us.

[15 : 04] We have a shepherd who's already laid down his life for us and he saved us by dying on the cross so that we can be free from this fear, fear of pretend kings. If you know friends or family who are in this situation, then, you know, please pray for them and encourage them to trust in God, to know that he is sovereign and that Jesus will be our true shepherd.

Friends, let's be like the Magi who managed to see past the pomp and the power of pretend kings and are neither fearful or overruled by Herod but chose to recognize in Jesus the true king of the Jews, the true king of the world.

Now, his work, God's work in us and in the church at the moment to the naked eye may not be as impressive as some of the other things in the world.

It might even be weak and spluttering but let me assure you that is the work of God among us. It is the work of the king of heaven and his plan for us, for the church in Christ will come to pass.

It will come to pass even as it did those many years ago. Let's trust in him. Let's pray. Father, we want to ask that in the busyness of Christmas as we are in the midst of catching up, preparing, that we do not forget about your son Jesus, the true king, the one who shepherds us each and every day of our lives, the one who shepherded us by laying down his life for us so that we can trust in him, so that we can live for him without fear, knowing that when we step up in faith, we will be rewarded.

[16 : 53] Help us to live by faith, not by sight and not out of fear. We pray this in Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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