

A Tale of Three Kings

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[0 : 00] Well, this is the fourth Sunday in the event, and here at Holy Trinity we've had quite a few carol services, so I don't know whether you've sort of grown a bit wary of all the carols that we've been singing.

But I know that one particular carol, the carol called We Three Kings, I feel like that's a favorite of us men. And it's been written specifically for us, you know, for our deep and rich baritone voices.

So I'm pretty sure that you men actually have this sudden urge to want to sing it now, so I've got the lyrics up there. Please join me. Ready?

Just the men. The women can join in two if you want, but just the men. I'll lead off. We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar.

Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star. Oh, star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.

[1 : 28] Second verse? No. Now, I'm pretty sure that you probably enjoyed doing that, but even as you were singing that, one or two of you might have been thinking, but wait, the Bible never mentions three kings or wise men.

Just because there's three kinds of gifts doesn't mean that there are three kings, right? And of course, you're right. There's no arguments there.

But if you look at the title tonight, and as we look at our passage, there are actually indeed three kings. Now, some of you may already know who they are, but if you don't, then let us look through the story as I introduce them to you.

So first, we have what I call the imposter king. That's King Herod, sitting in a palace in Jerusalem, the capital city, looking all important. But of course, even though Matthew calls him a king, he's simply a petty ruler, installed by the Romans.

He's not even a Jew. He's an Edomite. And like any imposter king, he's easily flustered, isn't he? Whenever there's the slightest challenge to his power.

[2 : 41] Why? Because there's no real legitimacy to his rule. He's not God's promised Messiah. And so, as we start in verse 1, we see that exact reaction when the Magi, or wise men, come to town.

Matthew writes, After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. Herod's immediate reaction in verse 3, When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

It disturbs him because there's a rival claim to his throne, one who is born King of the Jews, not merely installed by the Roman overlords. But secondly, he's disturbed because why wasn't he being told?

He's the king. It's like when you're the prime minister and you find out the party is going to dump you by turning on the TV. And so, Herod called the chief priests and the teachers of the law and asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

[3 : 50] Verse 4. You see, even Herod knew, didn't he, that a promised Messiah was coming. It was in God's word. And so they replied in verse 5, In Bethlehem, for this is what the prophet has written.

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. And we heard the reading from Micah. There was even that additional thing about how the land would be abandoned until the woman that is with child, the child is born. Now, nowadays, Bethlehem, we have in our eyes this idyllic and

maybe charming town because of Jesus, because of Christmas.

But back in Jesus' day, Bethlehem was nothing special. In fact, Jerusalem was where the action was. That was where the temple was. That was where King David's palace was.

Sure, Bethlehem was David's birthplace, but he outgrew it. Maybe it was okay for him when he was a shepherd, but now that he's a king, Jerusalem was where he lived and ruled.

[5 : 00] And so we see the contrast, don't we? King Herod, this imposter king, seemingly high and mighty in Jerusalem. And then the prophecy saying that the king of the Jews is to be born in Bethlehem, this lowly place just outside Jerusalem.

But again, as we've seen over the last few weeks, it's in keeping with God's way, how he chooses the humble and the weak to mock the proud and the powerful.

Well, Herod plots in verse 7. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found up from them the exact time the star appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I may go and worship him. Really? No, that's simply a lie, wasn't it?

His intent was to kill the baby. Well, by contrast, let's meet the second king. He's a true king and yet a humble and unassuming one.

[6 : 02] He's, of course, the king of the Jews, the one the Magi were looking for. And so in verse 9, the Magi continued their search. After they heard the king, they went on their way. And the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was born.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother. And they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, I want you to have a quick look at the passage again and just answer this question. Just look at how Jesus is being referred to in this passage.

Do you notice? Firstly, tell me, where is Jesus' name? Where does it appear in this passage? Does anyone? Anyone? It doesn't?

Yes, it does actually. One very particular spot. Second word of the chapter. At the very start, verse 1. But after that, there is no reference to his name, is there?

[7 : 14] Instead, what is the word that's being used? Have a look. What's the answer, anyone? What? Sorry? The child. Exactly. And in fact, the name Jesus isn't mentioned again until he becomes an adult in chapter 3 and verse 13.

Using the word child conveys the message, does it not, of a humble and defenseless person. Totally dependent. Vulnerable. And yet, at the same time, three times we're told, he's to be the object of worship.

Verse 2. The Magi come to him in order to worship him. Verse 8. Herod pretends that he too wants to worship him. And then finally, verse 11. When the Magi finally find him, they bow down and worship him.

In fact, verse 10. They are overjoyed and they present him with treasures, gifts that are fit only for a king. Now, I'm sure that as they turned up to Jerusalem, they would have been surprised not to find the royal baby living in a palace.

Instead, they're being directed to this little town outside Jerusalem, probably to a humble dwelling where they find God's promised king, the king of the Jews.

[8 : 32] And yet, they believe the signs. They believe God's promises. And so, they were happy to bow down. They were happy to worship him as king, even though he was the child, defenseless, dependent, humble.

Now, of course, this second king is now a threat to the first. And so, a tussle has been set up between the first king, the imposter king, and the second true but humble king.

And so, here's where the third king steps in. And by now, I'm pretty sure you know who this third king is. It's in the outline. It's the sovereign king, God.

But, again, although he's a king, he's actually an invisible king at this point. He's actually not named in the story at all. And yet, as we look at the story, his fingerprints are all over the story.

So, first, guess who is responsible for the star? Who puts the star at that place and prompts the Magi to make the journey? It's God. Second, who is the one who prophesied through Micah that Bethlehem will be the Messiah's birthplace?

[9 : 48] Hundreds of years before it happened. Well, God. But, of course, even here, right now, who is the one that frustrates Herod from doing what he intends to do, from tracking Jesus down?

It's God, isn't it? He intervenes in verse 12 in a dream to the Magi so that when they are warned, they do not go back to Herod but return to their country by another route.

And, of course, it doesn't end there because in the next chapter, in the next section, even as Herod continues in his plan and tries to kill all the two-year-olds, God intervenes yet again, does he not? He warns Joseph through a dream and Jesus is whisked away to Egypt. And so we see here that even though Jesus is defenseless and dependent, his sovereign God in heaven controls all the affairs of the world.

Nothing can harm him, not even Herod with all his power. And that's because no one can frustrate God's plan. For the fate of humanity rests on this child Jesus.

[10 : 56] He's the one who will come to save his people from their sins by dying on the cross. And brothers and sisters, that's what happens when we are submitted to God as well.

He too is sovereign in our world now. His will cannot be frustrated. No matter how impossible things might look, no matter how vulnerable we may seem to other forces in the world, God is still in control.

Nothing gets past our sovereign king in heaven. And especially when it comes to his plan for the Messiah. All the other kings may seem fearful, but they simply bend to God's will anyway, whether they like it or not.

And so I guess the question I pose today to reflect on for our sermon is, which king are we serving in our lives? Who are we serving in our lives?

Now we may think it's strange to ask that question because we live in a democracy where there are no kings. The queen, she's just a figurehead. But actually, even though we may not call them kings, they may be people and things that hold sway in our lives.

[12 : 13] Don't they? We just have to ask the question, I guess. Who do we feel we're unswilled to in life? Who do we fear falling far off? Who do you think has control over our decisions and what we say and what we do and how we decide to do things?

Well, these are the masters of our lives, are they not? Or perhaps you may think you're the master. You may not think like that consciously, but certainly you may live like that.

You live as though your destiny and your fate is in your own hands. That the key for you is that if you work hard enough or smart enough, then yes, you are the master of your own destiny.

And if you live like that, you know, you're not actually alone because many people do. That's the hope of many people in life. But unfortunately, I think if you just sat down and just thought for a moment, I think you just, you realize soon enough how unrealistic or impossible that is.

Because so much of life is outside our control, isn't it not? Our health, things that other people do, forces of nature. We're just kidding ourselves, aren't we, if we think we're in control.

[13 : 31] We're just acting like Herod, trying to maintain our grip on life and our rule over it when really we can't. Now, maybe some of you don't think like that.

Maybe you do feel the pressure and burden of people and things in your life, people that seem to rule you. And perhaps you're terrified even to cross them. Perhaps it's your boss.

Perhaps they're friends and the peer pressure that they exert on you to want to do things, otherwise they wouldn't accept you. Perhaps it's just society. All the messages you get that unless you make certain decisions in life, things will not go well.

You have to do these things. You have to, you know, get a job. You have to save. You have to, have to. All these kind of messages of success that they say of you.

Or maybe it's even your family or your parents. And that's, I guess, sometimes hard because they may mean well, don't they? But perhaps their expectations are unrealistic or crushing.

[14 : 38] And you may need to feel the need to, you know, I don't know, do it because you want to protect their fears. Look back with me at chapter 2 again in verse 3 and I wonder whether you notice that in verse 3 it says that not only was King Herod disturbed, but all Jerusalem with him.

Now have you, I don't know, I've just looked at it and I wonder, why would the rest of Jerusalem be disturbed with Herod? Why buy into Herod's paranoia? Shouldn't they be glad that the true king of the Jews was born?

It's a bit puzzling, isn't it? Well, I think it only makes sense if in some sense they've bought in to the lie as well that Herod is purveying.

Faced with Herod as their ruler and maybe they've got, he's got connections or things that he's doing for them. They can't imagine an alternate reality. They can't imagine that actually God's promises to them are better than what Herod can offer them.

And sometimes they may even think, you know what, God's promises are true and yes, I'll get more joy and peace and freedom from following God, not Herod or the Romans. But then they think, oh, you know what, it's just too much effort, isn't it?

[15:59] Too much upheaval to go from that where at least we have some stability to then following God or going after his promises. And I wonder whether sometimes for you, life is a bit like that as well.

You hear the Word of God and you know His promises and you know, you know what, they are great. What God is promising us, joy, peace and freedom to be found in Christ and trusting in His Son, not just for our salvation but walking day to day, day by day with Him.

Yeah, that's great but there's just so many things in my life, it's just too hard. I can't change those. Maybe we think like that.

But I would like to remind you from this passage today that actually God is sovereign. His will will prevail in the end even if it seems impossible. And I'm not suggesting then that the first thing we do is, you know, just stand up all these masters and just go, I'm done with you.

Yeah, we may not have the courage to do that straight away but really the first thing to realize is to just think and realize and acknowledge that God is very much in control even though He's unseen.

[17:14] And yes, pray to Him and say, Lord, I do want to submit to Your will, to Your sovereignty over my life. You see, if God is in control of the world, that includes you and me.

His demand of sovereignty extends to our lives as well. So if you have not done that just yet, acknowledge Him as King in your life, then can I encourage you this Christmas to do that?

To come to the Lord and say, yes, you are my King and I want to serve you. And then perhaps ask Him to show you how you can then deal with all the other fake and imposter kings and masters in your life and no longer follow their ways.

You see, we don't have to be afraid of God as King. He's not like the other imposter kings. He's not wanting to rule over you to oppress you or to give you a hard time. No, He's already shown that He sent His Son, Jesus, to rule over us as a shepherd over His people.

That is, to care for us, to provide for us, to lay down His life for us. And if you come back on Wednesday or Tuesday night, I'll spend a bit more time just looking at that very verse of how Jesus is our shepherd king and how amazing that is that He is our shepherd king.

[18:43] Friends, the reality is that we all have to acknowledge a king in our lives some way or somehow. So the question is, which king are you going to serve? The king who loves you and has your best interests at heart?

The king who has the power over all creation? Or some other imposter king who may at first glance seem to have all the power and exert all the fear but really is nothing compared to who God is?

I'm sure many of you have been hooked on Star Wars of late. The final movie is out. We've been watching reruns at home just to psych myself up for the final movie.

Don't worry, I haven't watched it yet so no spoilers. But don't give me any spoilers either. I'm going to watch it the day after Boxing Day. But if you are familiar with Star Wars movies, you know, wouldn't you, that whether it's the evil empire or the First Order or Darth Vader, the oppressive forces of evil in the movie always seem all powerful, don't they?

In fact, Darth Vader, Emma was just watching Empire Strikes Back before we came to church, but Darth Vader was saying to Luke in Empire Strikes Back, wasn't he, that you can't resist the dark side, come to the dark, it's your destiny to come to the dark side.

[20:07] And in the movie, there's no sitting on the fence, is there? You have to choose between good and evil. You can't sit on the fence. You're either with the empire or you're with the rebellion. And in the movie, the dark side is always so compelling.

They're always telling you that their power seems unbreakable. Well, often it seems like a similar thing in our world as well, doesn't it? Star Wars is make-believe.

I hope you know that. But in our world, yes, it's make-believe, but in our world, we too have to choose, don't we? And like the rebellion, Jesus' birth is subversive.

It seems so weak and ineffectual. But actually, it's more real and powerful than all the other pressures and forces in our lives. Sin's hold on humanity is finally and truly broken in his death.

And if we choose to follow Jesus, then nothing else in this world has mastery over us, not least evil. So this Christmas, let me encourage you to again trust in this true king.

[21 : 12] Keep trusting him or trust him for the first time. Don't be afraid of the imposter kings in your life. If you know what they are, then bring them to the Lord for help to stand up to them.

And last of all, don't deceive yourself to think that you might be the master of your own life. Because there is only one true king, God in heaven and his son Jesus.

Let's pray. Father, we acknowledge you as the true king of this world, sovereign over creation and history. We worship your son, the shepherd king, humble and selfless, who laid down his life for his sheep.

Help us to trust in you and to submit our lives to you fully and wholeheartedly. And give us freedom from all that oppresses us from sin and from those who seek to stop us from serving you.

We pray this in Jesus, our king and saviour's name. Amen.