

Mixed Expectations: Herod and the Magi (Evening Service)

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Date: 10 December 2017

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening once again. Merry Christmas, everybody. Is it too early to say that? Is that okay? You're singing very, very well. Good job. If you've never met me, my name is Aaron Roberts. I'm the minister for this service here at St. John's.

And what I want to do for about 10 minutes here is look at the reading that was just read, so Matthew 2. And as you heard it read, it's pretty easy to pick up on the fact that this is a story of two extremes, isn't it?

There's worship and joy and gifts on one side, and there's insecurity and death and brutality on the other side. And I want to talk about that. But before we get into the details, let's do a quick flyover, 10,000 feet, a quick flyover of the story.

All right, so Jesus has been born under the reign of a guy called Herod. Some wise men turn up. They're like astrologers from somewhere east, and they turn up to Herod's palace, and they say, So, where's the new king?

And Herod sort of, you know, keeps him in the waiting room, goes and talks to his sort of religious experts, and he says, and they say, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

[1 : 1 0] The king, there's a king, he's going to be born. He's the Messiah. He's going to be born in Bethlehem. Herod goes back, this time taking the wise men's story fairly seriously this time, and he says, so, you should go find this king, and if you find him, let me know.

Let me know where he's in, because I'd love to meet the guy, which actually means we find it later. I want to kill this guy. So the wise men go on their way, and they follow the star, and they meet Jesus, and they worship him, and they give him gifts.

But the angels intercede, and they say to the wise men, don't go back to Herod. And Herod probably realizes at some point that he's been betrayed, he's been tricked, and if we keep reading, we see he can't work out where Jesus is, so he decides to kill all the children, all the little boys in Bethlehem.

It was a small place, but it was probably still about 20 or 30 of them. Jesus escapes, and Herod dies. That's the overview. What do we make of this?

What do we make of this story here? Well, the whole narrative revolves around how people respond to this child, to the news of this child.

[2 : 1 8] A whole narrative revolves around these responses. And very simply, there are good responses, and there are bad responses. Let's look at them. Let's start with Herod.

Now, Herod was a Roman-appointed king of Judea at Galilee. This is modern-day Israel. He was brilliant, and he was brutal. He was brilliant in the sense that he wanted to put the kingdom on the map, so he sort of undertook these colossal building projects, including rebuilding the Jewish temple.

But he was a violent man. He was a violent man even by the standards of the time. It seemed he lived in constant fear of rivals to the throne.

He would do anything. He would do anything to protect that power. In fact, to protect his own power, his own throne, he killed his mother. He killed his wife.

He killed three of his sons. He killed half the Jewish council to protect that power. So these magi come in, and they say, So, where's the new king that the stars have been talking about?

[3 : 22] Now, I'm a fairly nice guy, but if somebody turned up to the worship service tonight and said, Hey, I heard there's going to be a new evening service minister. My mum's a trustee. I'm insecure enough to admit that I'd be fairly alarmed by that.

And I'd probably say something like, Wow, yeah, I'd love to meet this new person. Really would love to bless them and just congratulate them and stuff.

So this news coming to a complete sociopath, right, was very alarming. There's a new king. The passage says Herod was troubled.

But interestingly, it also says that all of Jerusalem with him, and I think what's going on there, this is like Jerusalem were like the children of a violent father. And when dad's angry, when he comes home angry, the whole family's on edge.

So Herod schemes to find out where the child is. He's betrayed. So he commits infanticide. Folks, Herod is awful, right? He's insecure. He's proud.

[4 : 29] He's fearful. He's brutal. And if you are even slightly self-aware, you'll know that there are little bits of Herod in you.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, Goodness, that took a very dark turn. I really just wanted a nice sermon on the baby Jesus. Well, we're getting to the good news.

But you have to know, you can't know the good news unless you realize how big a hole you're in before God rescued you. So let's stay with Herod for a moment here. So why do I say that there's a little bit of Herod in all of us?

And I think it's because when we're really honest, I think we want the world to orbit around our needs and desires. And when somebody claims kingship over us, it can trigger a deep resistance in us.

Thomas Nagel, he's an American philosopher. He's an atheist. And he's spoken very honestly about his confusion with some of his friends who are Christians. And he's going, Some of the smartest people I know are Christians.

[5 : 34] I can't get my head around that. And he speaks very honestly. And he says, I don't know why they believe that. But also, I just don't want there to be a God. He says, I just don't want there to be a God.

He talks about it. And this is the phrase he used. He talks about the cosmic authority problem. He says, I just don't want there to be a higher authority than me.

That's the cosmic authority problem. And in all of our hearts, I think our hearts pulse with this idea that no one should be able to tell me what to do. And Herod is a very extreme form of this.

Okay. What are we doing here? We're talking about responses to Jesus. That's the first one, Herod's. It's a response of severe resistance. All right. There's another response.

We see it in the reaction of these what seem like minor players who should have been major players. But they turned out to be minor players. These are the scribes and the Pharisees. So these are the professional religious people.

[6 : 34] So Herod pulls them aside. And he's going, I forgot these magi. They're talking about a new king. What's going on? Could it be true? And they're like, sure. Yes. Scripture says Christ will be born in Bethlehem.

Which from where they were standing was literally 10 kilometers away. That's from here to the P&E.; Exactly. So armed with the knowledge that the Messiah has possibly been born a few neighborhoods over, what do the religious professionals do?

They do nothing. They enter the nativity story and they disappear. And what makes it worse is they quote scripture.

Like they quote scripture. They talk about the Bible. Oh yeah, actually the Christ will be born. It says right here. It's Bethlehem. Just like. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm just going to go back to my desk and do my scribing.

My pharah saying. They're all head, no heart. They have the right answers, but they don't do anything. And considering the magnitude of what is happening and how close it is to them, their indifference is just staggering.

[7 : 55] Is there possibly a little bit of the scribes in us? So we've looked at two responses to Jesus. There are those who do nothing with the news.

They're indifferent. There are those who are openly hostile. And if you're in either of these two camps tonight, Christmas is a great time to reconsider your stance. Let me tell you that.

Let's look at another response. We see it in the passage. It's the Magi. It's the wise men from the east. We don't know much about them actually. It just says they came from where the sun comes up. Babylonians, they could have been Chinese.

We actually just don't know. They were pagans. We know that. So how do they respond? Well, in three ways. They respond in three ways. First, they seek out the Messiah, which is wonderful, isn't it?

They seek out the Messiah. They follow God's clues. They travel across the deserts. These guys are amazing. Compared to the scribes and Pharisees, these guys were amazing.

[8 : 50] They had so little to go on, but they were all in. The scribes, they had the scriptures for goodness sake, and they did nothing.

They had so much to go on, they did nothing. If you play Texas Hold'em poker, the wise men, they had a pair of twos. All in. I am all in.

All in. Pharisees, pocket aces, folding. It's a shocking story, you know. It is a shocking story. And it's shocking that it was these kind of seemingly random foreigners.

We're the only ones to go to Bethlehem. Not one priest, not one scribe could be bothered. They heard the rumors, but the Magi turn up to Jesus alone. Passage, verse 10, it says, and they did it with joy, and they did it with wonder.

I find that very challenging. They did it with joy, and they did it with wonder. They didn't understand substitutionary atonement. They didn't know about the Torah. They didn't know about the stuff.

[9 : 53] But what they did get, oh, it was so wonderful to them. They sought out Jesus. They sought him out. The second response is they worshipped the child.

What does that mean that they worshipped the child? What is worship? What are we talking about here when they worship? Worship begins with recognizing who you're dealing with. And the Magi talk about Jesus as a king, not somebody that's going to be this really cool guy and say some cool things, but as the king.

And then they fall down on the ground. And when you do that, what you're saying is you're saying to this person, you're saying, you are high and I am low. You're saying, you have great dignity, and I am lowly by comparison.

So the Magi, they seek Jesus. So when they get there, they respond appropriately. They worship. And lastly, they give. So what is the deal with the gold frankincense and myrrh?

What is that about? First, was it a care package? Obviously not. Useless, right? If it was a care package, they would have brought diapers and frozen casseroles and that kind of thing.

[10 : 55] So it wasn't that. Was it expensive stuff to get Jesus off to a good start in life? No. If they think he's the king of the universe, they probably think he's going to do okay.

Like, he's going to be looked after. Was it a bribe? Remember me, Jesus, when you're dishing out your blessings. Here's a couple of little things that will slide under the table.

A bit of gold right there for you. No, it's not a bribe. The gold and frankincense is myrrh. What is this all about? It's the sort of thing you give to the king. You're giving stuff to a king.

The king doesn't need it. You need it a lot more than the king does. So why would you do that? Because it's sacrificial giving. And here's what it communicates. It communicates this. It says, As great as these things are that I'm giving to you, you are my real treasure.

You are my treasure, not these things. So the wise men, they sought Jesus out. They worshipped. And they gave him gifts.

[11 : 59] Let's begin to close up here. So we're looking at how people react to the news that this baby has been born, this Christ. And the difference between their responses is stark.

That's the major sort of point of the passage. It's a great challenge to us, how we respond to Jesus, I think. This would be a good place to finish in the sermon. But there's an elephant in the room, isn't there?

I should say there's an elephant in the story. And the elephant is this. God becomes a baby. Not even like, you know, like a Roman baby born in like an arena or something.

I don't know, you know, like something glorious. No. A refugee Jewish child born into poverty. God. That's the elephant in the room.

And if you're a visitor here, you have every right to think, that is so bizarre. That is so weird. Why would God do that? And the reason it happens like this, that God has born a child, is because it's trying to tell us something about how God saves.

[13 : 14] And it says to us that God uses weakness to save us. We are, in our hearts, a mix of Herod, a bit of Magi, a bit of the Scribes.

They're all in there. And despite this great mess we are in sort of internally, God loves us and wants to save us. And how does he do that?

He saves us using weakness. It seems to be the way that God likes to work. And before we get to sort of how it works, a reminder that this really is how God seems to work.

Think about how God chooses in the Bible. Who he chooses. He chooses Abel, not Cain. Isaac, not Ishmael. Jacob, not Esau. David, not his older brothers. The younger, weaker brother.

Isn't that interesting? Against every cultural convention. Another example. In Bible times when women were valued for fertility and beauty and youth.

[14 : 15] Who does God choose? He chooses old Sarah, not Hagar. Unloved Leah, not Rachel. He chooses Rebecca who's infertile. Hannah who's infertile. Elizabeth who's infertile.

He chooses the girls nobody wants and nobody values. God seems to operate through weakness. He chose his son, the king, to be born.

Not descending. He chose his son to be born. Jesus didn't descend to this enormous warrior. Ultra tall, muscular warrior.

A child. God was born. In an animal stable. God seems to choose weakness.

Why does God do this sort of thing? Is it because he just likes the underdog? Because he likes the underdog narrative? No. He's telling us something about salvation. That's the point I'm trying to get to here.

[15:11] And he's trying to tell us how salvation works. Salvation works through weakness. And it's weakness on both sides of the equation. On the side of God and on the side of humanity. And let me explain it very quickly and we'll finish.

To be saved, we must admit that we are weak. We need to admit that there is, we have the cosmic sort of resistance of Herod in our hearts.

That we have the indifference of the scribes in our hearts too. And no matter what we do, we can't change ourselves. See, every other faith says you can.

Every other faith says do your best. Pull yourself together. Use these spiritual techniques that we have. Summon up all the strength you have and live better.

That is the opposite of Christianity. Christianity says admit your weakness. Admit your failure. Admit that you need to be rescued from your situation.

[16:09] That is called repentance. That's our side of the equation. How does God save us in his weakness? And here we address the elephant in the room. He has born a child. God has born a child.

God becomes a fleshy, weak human. Why? So he can bleed. So he can die for us.

A price must be paid for the evil in the world. And it falls on Jesus. That's why Jesus was born in weakness. That's why he was born a baby. I'll finish up here.

It's a wonderful story, right? This is a wonderful story. And if you're a Christian, I hope this has been a helpful reminder for what Christmas is about. If you're here and you're not a Christian, I hope you want to find out more about it.

And I hope you want to come back to all the things we've got going on over Christmas. Folks, the story of Jesus is just too big to be indifferent about. Amen.

[17:10] Amen. Amen. Thank you, God. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.