

January 6, 2018  
Siggelkow  
Matthew 2:1-23  
Day of Epiphany

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### “The Migrant King”

Good morning, friends. This morning we celebrate, along with much of the Christian church around the globe, the Day of Epiphany. In the dominant Western traditions of Christianity, this day commemorates the visit of the Magi to the Christ child, and so also the first manifestation of the gospel to non-Jewish people, what the New Testament calls, Gentiles. In Eastern traditions, however, this day commemorates the manifestation of Jesus as the Messiah and the second person of the Trinity, as revealed in the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. In most Christian traditions Epiphany is a Feast Day, and for many people around the world it marks the time when Christmas decorations are taken down. As Anabaptists, we do not tend to follow the liturgical calendar very closely, but our lectionary reading for today from the Gospel of Matthew is a common text to read on Epiphany.

For the third year in a row we at Faith Mennonite Church have been following a lectionary developed out of Luther Seminary in St. Paul; this lectionary seeks to read the Bible from a narrative perspective – that is, it encourages us to read the Bible as if it were a book to be read from front to back, as if there were a narrative plot with twists and turns – that begins with Genesis and culminates with Jesus. If you’ve been paying attention, you might have observed that our first New Testament reading since last August just appeared the Sunday before Christmas. We spent September through December in various books of the Old Testament. Now, the lectionary encourages us to focus the next several weeks, even months, on the narrative that unfolds in a single Gospel. You may recall that last year, we focused our attention on the Gospel of John. This year we turn our attention to the Gospel of Matthew. Part of the beauty of the New Testament and indeed the Bible more generally is its irreducible diversity. The Bible is not of one voice; it is polyphonic, we might say. Nowhere is this more evident than in the so-called New Testament Gospels, a collection of incredibly diverse documents which the church has long confessed bears witness to the “Good News” of this One named Jesus. Think about it for a moment. It could have been otherwise. The early church could have decided, for the sake of unity, simplicity, stability and to ensure a sure foundation, to include simply one account, one report of Jesus. But instead, the early church decided to place in its “canon” of the New Testament not one or two but *four* different accounts of Jesus, each with their own perspectives and emphases.

Of course, in many ways the Gospel accounts resemble one another, sometimes revealing minor differences and other times more substantive differences. Scholars maintain that the Gospel of Mark was probably written first among the four and it is likely that the authors of Matthew and Luke would have read and knew well the Gospel of Mark, even if they had their own individual “takes” on the story of Jesus. The relationship between Mark, Luke, and Matthew to the Gospel of John, however, is much less clear. And, of course, there were other reports, too, written and oral, from friends and enemies, from a multitude of different “camps.”

The Gospel of Matthew, among the so-called synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), is perhaps the most self-consciously “Jewish” in its basic orientation and “take” on Jesus; that is not to

say the others are not *as* Jewish, of course, but simply that Matthew is very much concerned to locate Jesus the Jew within his historical and theological context, and he is intent to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of the hopes and expectations of the people of Israel, the One to whom the scriptures consistently point and in whom they find their final meaning. This is why, for example, Matthew begins his Gospel with a rather lengthy genealogy that begins with Abraham, the recognized patriarch of Jewish faith. For Matthew, the person and work of Jesus can only be adequately understood when viewed as the “son of Abraham” and the “son of David.” Jesus is the heir of the patriarchs and kings of Israel’s history, which ends with Joseph, the son of Jacob, and husband of Mary the mother of Jesus.

But to say that Matthew’s Gospel is perhaps the most self-consciously “Jewish” does not mean that Judaism was a singular entity or that all Jews were of one mind in the first century. Far from it. Just as the New Testament points to the diversity of early Christianity, so too, we might better speak of the varieties of Judaism(s) in the first century. This is clearly evident in Matthew’s Gospel and particularly in our reading for today, because here we are made witnesses to *competing* claims about who is to be considered the rightful “king” of the Jewish people. Matthew is at once making a *theological* argument in his claim that the birth of Jesus means Emmanuel, “God is with us,” and a *political* argument that Jesus, and not King Herod, is to be recognized as “king of the Jews.”

Our passage for today begins with the phrase “In the time of Herod,” a clear indication that Matthew seeks to set the significance of the birth of Jesus firmly within the historical and political context of his time. Then appear the infamous “wise men from the East” (or *Magi* in Gk). I am sorry to say that contrary to the popular Christmas song and the nativity sets in your home, these people were probably not “kings” and there is no indication that there were “three” of them. It is also unlikely that they were “magicians.” Jesus’ visitors were, instead, mostly likely, Zoroastrian priests of Persia, who had left their temples where they worshiped their god, Ahura Mazda, to travel hundreds of miles to honor and worship Jesus as the king of the Jews. This might strike us as strange at first glance, but it’s important to note that Jews and Zoroastrians had a long history of interaction and mutual influence. In the first century the messianic hopes of the Jewish people would have been familiar to the Zoroastrians.

At least a few of these priests followed a star in the sky all the way to Jerusalem, the city of God, the city of the Temple, where Herod the King resided. That the very appearance of the foreign priests looking for “the king of the Jews,” sets King Herod into a frenzy should signal to us the incredibly tenuous and unstable character of his reign. As a descendent of the Edomites who were conquered and forcibly converted to Judaism by the Hasmoneans, there would have been a great deal of mistrust in Herod’s claim to kingship, particularly among the Pharisees and zealots who did not view Herod as Jewish enough to rule as King of the people. To make matters worse, Herod’s father had been given control over Judea by the occupying Roman Empire. Herod had done much to improve his image among the people, but his collaboration with occupying imperial forces, made him deeply suspect. Here we witness an incredibly fragile leader, deeply threatened by the people and the infringement of foreigners. As in our own time, so too in the first century, this proved to be a recipe for disaster, especially for the most vulnerable people.

Herod’s initial reaction to the inquiry of the wise men was to gather all the experts, the chief priests and the scribes, who informed him that the scriptures point directly to Bethlehem not Jerusalem as the location of where the Messiah will be born. He sends the wise men out to Bethlehem, and following

the star in the sky they encounter the house where the young Jesus is with his mother and they offer him gifts, but they do not become informants for King Herod. But a different informant, an angel of the Lord is on the loose, who warns the wise men and Joseph about Herod's plans to destroy the child. In the middle of the night, Joseph and Mary did what any loving mother or father would do, they got up and left town seeking safety. Fleeing the threat of violence of Herod out love for their child and out of love for their lives, they become migrants, and like the migrants of our own day and the migrants in our community, they embody in their lives and in their actions the strength and the power and the love of God.

It is at this point that Herod commences his reign of terror, stemming out of a deep concern to preserve his own power, and along with it, the status quo of collaboration with the occupying Roman Empire. When the established order is threatened by the strength and power and love that comes from below in precisely those places where "God is with us," in the lives and movement of ordinary people, the rule of law and the policies deployed to enforce and solidify the dominance of the elite, quickly become weapons for the destruction of the most vulnerable people. And so, the violence that was present beneath the surface of rule of law now bursts forth like an unstoppable volcano, erupting onto ordinary people in the most devastating ways. In an act of unspeakable terror, Herod turns the threat into a pretext to order his men to kill "all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger" to ensure the "stability" of his violent politics of law and order.

In our own day, the reign of terror that ensued in the wake of the military coup in Honduras was largely an attempt to reassert the power of the elite against ordinary Honduran people. One by one ordinary people from Honduras who courageously and nonviolently resisted the military take-over of their country were taken from their homes, disappeared, or assassinated. The Obama administration and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton helped to ensure the devastation of Honduras, blaming the democratically-elected and recently ousted President Zelaya, for "contributing to the polarization of Honduran society" and for unleashing the violent events that ensued after the coup.<sup>1</sup> As with Herod who was anxious to maintain his collaboration with the Roman Empire, the Honduran elite in collaboration with the US Empire, saw in the election of Zelaya, and more importantly, in the people's movement that his election rendered visible, a serious threat to their power over the region, indeed, the whole Western hemisphere.

The Soto Cano Air Base had become one of the few places in Latin America where the United States could land its big planes, since Ecuador had evicted the US from its base in 2007, and the US was concerned to keep the door wide open for transnational corporations to extract wealth from the labor and land of the region and to privatize nearly every major sector of society. These interests had been threatened by Zelaya's reforms that sought to expand the rights of workers and indigenous people. By early May 2010, not even a year after the coup, Honduras was being heralded by some as a place for economic development: "Honduras is Open for Business" was the title of an "investment conference," at which Bill Clinton was scheduled to be the main speaker, specifically designed to assure transnational investors that Honduras "promised a golden future." "We are the most attractive investment destination in Latin America" the conference's glossy pamphlet read on its first page.<sup>2</sup> Violent repression of mass resistance and the opening of Honduras for gang activity and drug

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Frank, *The Long Honduran Night: Resistance, Terror, and the United States in the Aftermath of the Coup* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2018) 17.

<sup>2</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 73.

trafficking from which the Honduran elite largely profited, has created a situation in which the police, gangs, the criminal justice system, and the government are all deeply interwoven. By 2016, ten women in Honduras were killed every week, nearly ninety percent with impunity, making the country one of the most dangerous place in the world for women.<sup>3</sup>

When Nuria and her children fled Honduras in the middle of the night, they showed themselves to be not vulnerable, but ungovernable – they refused to be governed by political or economic power. When Mary and Joseph and their child fled Bethlehem in the middle of the night they, too, showed themselves to be *ungovernable*; in their decision to flee, to become ‘migrants’ they demonstrated not weakness and vulnerability, but strength and courage and a deep love for life. Indeed, their lives reveal the truth that no matter the ways a governing body devises to oppress and destroy human lives, there is a power and a strength and love that is so full of life, so full of beauty that not even the power of Death can contain it. And yet, the regime of terror and the violent consequences of the terror remain, and the mothers of the world cry out in love for those who are gone: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” The refusal of consolation, to be permitted to weep and to mourn, like Mary and Joseph’s decision to flee out of love for their child, “the Migrant King of the Jews,” also marks a great refusal to allow the power of Death to determine life and the future of life.

It is *this* One, the Migrant Child, who we confess to be “king of the Jews,” a claim that unsettles the politics of his day as much as in our own day, calling us to see the strength and power and love of God in the lives of those who become ungovernable, those who thirst for new life in the face of death.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 192.