

“Come and See”

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I had bowed before Herod and Caesar, but I would now seek the true King.

Matthew 2:1-8

December 13, 2020

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

Terrified into inertia

(This is the third first-person Advent sermon based on Matthew 1-2. In the first, I told Matthew’s story from the perspective of his brother, James the Less. Last week, my colleague Kevin narrated the story of Joseph, who agonized over Mary’s pregnancy until an angel assured him the baby was Immanuel. Remember that a narrative sermon is a combination of this Scripture, other Scriptures, other sources, and creative license.)

It is somewhat startling and a little amusing to see me pictured in your window. No, I’m not one of the twelve around the table at the bottom. Obviously I’m not Jesus. My name is Petronius. I’m there, at his feet, one of the custodians assigned to Joseph’s tomb. It seems the story we circulated among the Jews that day has persisted. It isn’t true that we were sleeping. We were terrified into inertia by an earthquake and a blaze of angelic light. Well trained to deal with swords, nothing had prepared us for that!

We went immediately to the chief priest, the religious authorities. They seemed a safer alternative than Pilate. Our instincts were correct. This was the worst case scenario from the Jews’ perspective – no dead body to refute the claim of his disciples that he rose from the dead. They simply bribed us, promising to protect us from Pilate’s wrath. Pilate didn’t care. If the Jews were happy, his job and his neck were secure.

The king of the Jews

The alliance between the occupying Roman government and the Jewish high priests and scribes was a century in the making, and multi-layered. It was always in the

best interests of the king or procurator to keep the priests happy, and the other way around. If the Jews were so inclined, they could easily incite a mob. The Roman legion could quell the rebellion without much of a fight, but a bloodbath in Jerusalem would jeopardize the status of the ruler. The Romans valued their Pax Romana.

On the Jewish side, the alliance was perhaps more surprising. The Greeks had forced their language and culture across their empire to the point that the Maccabees had revolted. The miracle story of their victory has been remembered ever since in the festival of Hanukkah. A century later, two rival powers in Jerusalem both appealed to the Roman general Pompey to take their side. The Romans could always say they were invited to bring peace and order to Jerusalem.

I was present for one of the most memorable moments in this Roman-Jewish alliance. Born in Rome, this was the farthest west I had ever traveled. I was intrigued with power and strength, and wanted to serve Caesar. The Via Egnatia, a highway through Greece and Asia Minor, was in part built by my bare hands, moving trees and soil, replacing them with granite for trade wagons and military brigades. My hard work earned a commission in the Roman army. I was sent to Fortress Antonia in Jerusalem.

I was the first to see them crest the Mount of Olives to the east of the city. As I strained my eyes, I could see the forms of camels with men and possibly women walking alongside and a handful of dignitaries astride the camel humps. I reported their approach to my centurion. They didn't seem like a threat, but it wasn't mine to decide.

"Petronius!" the centurion barked at me. "Take some others to meet them at the gate. Herod will want to know why they have come."

"What is your business?" I asked, the gate securely barred behind me.

"We're looking for the King of Jews," came the response.

"Herod is their king. Why are you looking for him?"

"Is this Herod a baby?"

"Heavens, no, stranger. Why would a baby be their king?"

"We wish to see Herod, then."

"I have no authority even to open the gate to you, much less to grant audience."

"We mean no harm," he said calmly. "We are Magi from Persia, and we saw a rising star, and we came to bow down before him."

"When you see Herod, you will bow. But he is no newborn. If you have come to make trouble, there's a legion of us who will make sure you never go home alive."

“No trouble, young man. We come in peace. Take us to the king.”

Fool!

I left them at the gate and reported their presence to my centurion. “They say they are Magi from Persia, sir. I see four or five of them, richly adorned, with a harem and an entourage. I see no weapons, but their camels carry large pouches. Who knows what – or who – might be hiding in there.”

“Magi, huh? Probably harmless. I’ve heard of them. Stargazers and scholars. By day they read ancient scrolls. By night they study the sky. Their pedigree goes back centuries to a man named Balaam. When the Babylonians destroyed the original Jewish temple and exiled many of their people, some Jews never came back home. These Magi study the Jewish scrolls and all other sorts. In the eyes of many they are wise men. Jews have little use for them. Why did you say they have come, Petronius?”

“They saw a star, and wish to bow down before the newborn king.”

“That’s a dilemma. I like you, Petronius. Your strength is that of Hercules, but your wisdom is that of Solomon. Some day you will be a general. What should we do?”

“They seem innocent, sir. They speak calmly and wisely. We should let them in.”

“Fool. You failed my test. Your first instinct should be up the chain of power. We shall see the commander.” I accompanied him up the steps into the fortress.

I explained to the commander what I had seen and heard. “Let them in?” His voice lowered. “Soldier, what do you know of Herod?”

“I know little of his story, except that at my age he fought valiantly against the Jewish rebel Ezekias, capturing and executing an entire rebellious force. Since then he has earned favor with successive emperors, built palaces and theaters and aqueducts and temples, including this fortress and the unparalleled beauty and grandeur of this Jewish shrine. Nothing like it has been seen or heard of across the empire in its size and glory. He knows when to raise taxes and when to slash them. He has kept peace among the people and the priests admire him.”

The commander lowered his voice. “You’re obviously new and have been to Herod School, my boy. That’s what he wishes everyone to believe. What you don’t know is that he has married ten times, executed his first one, as well as three sons. All while feigning to follow Jewish law. Caesar Augustus has said, ‘It’s safer to be Herod’s big than his son.’ Now in ill health, he has signed his sixth ‘last will and testament.’ He recently convinced Caesar Augustus to appoint Archelaus as his successor. This ‘peace’ of which you speak is only one side of the story. Archelaus killed three thousand in a Passover riot, and not long ago another revolt required two months to suppress.”

“Then why do the Jewish priests cooperate with him?”

“Two reasons. First, he built their temple, consulting their own legal experts not only to meet but to exceed their specifications. They loved him for this limestone shrine, grander and larger and stronger than anything they had imagined. Second, their power and influence depends on him. If he goes down, they go down as well.”

“Then we should send these Magi away.”

“Fool! Herod has spies everywhere. More than likely your entire conversation at the gate was overhead from the wall and has already been reported in his bedchamber. Usher them in, carefully guarded. I will get word to Herod.”

The commander was right. It was too late to “get word to Herod.” The streets had become eerily quiet. Word had spread not only to the palace but to the marketplace that Magi had come investigating a star heralding the birth of a new king. Herod had become enraged, and had already consulted his advisors. They in turn had called in not only the high priest, but the captain of the temple, the coordinator of the priestly schedule, the chief financial officer, and the biblical scholars, most of whom were Pharisees. Everyone who was anyone in Jerusalem among the Jewish leaders were already rushing to Herod’s side. If Herod wasn’t happy, nobody was happy.

I was recalled before I even reached the gate. I returned to the palace just in time to hear Herod say, “No generalities! I want specifics! Where do your Scriptures say your Messiah is to be born?”

One scribe spoke up. “In Bethlehem, here in Judea,” came the trembling voice.

“Bethlehem! That’s a nothing town. I know it’s where David was born, but he made Jerusalem the City of David. Bethlehem is nothing but a pasture and a granary.”

“Not all scribes have agreed, sir, but we concur this is what the prophet Micah meant when he said, “You, little Bethlehem, will produce a ruler, a shepherd of Israel.”

“We’ll see about that!” Herod thundered. “Send these Gentile astrologers who bury their noses in the dusty writers of dead pagan diviners off to that little nothing town. My son Archelaus will rule when – or IF – I die. When these nobodies report back to me the identity of this infant nobody, both the child and his parents will meet the same fate as anyone else who has ever dared interfere with my legacy.”

I spoke up, but immediately wished I hadn’t. “Shall we accompany the Magi?”

“Fool!” (I was a little tired of that word.) “Who are you, anyway?”

“Petronius, sir. Recently assigned to Jerusalem after working on the Via Egnatia. I am the custodian who met them at the eastern gate.”

“Idiot. Of course we won’t send soldiers with them. It will alert their entire entourage as well as the child’s parents. The presence of Roman soldiers will raise the stakes too high, and they might escape before I get my hands on them, which I swear by Caesar I will. Instead, make their entourage wait outside the gate. Send a curtained carriage to the gate. Usher them in secretly. I wish to speak to them.”

“Who should retrieve them, O King?” asked the centurion.

“The fool who met them, of course. That will raise the least suspicion. Send Pretonius, and do it all after dark.”

And that’s how I heard the next conversation. A very different Herod spoke with all the savvy of insecure but raw power. “So you saw a star, and you’re expecting a new king to rise. As you can see, my health is failing. How good to know that God has answered our prayers for a new ruler. Please, my friends, when did this star appear?”

“About twelve moons ago, O King! We searched our written sources and discussed among Jewish and Persian sages what this might mean. We all agreed based on the location and luminescence that a new King would be born for the Jews.”

“Oh, that delights my faltering ears. Please, go and search for the child. When you find him, tell me all about him so I can worship him too.”

As they turned to go, he said, “Petronius, would you stay for a moment so that I can reward you for your gracious hospitality to our guests.” My heart skipped.

As soon as the Magi were out of earshot, his countenance changed as he spoke to the commander. “Send this fool back to the rock piles. He’ll better serve the empire with his back than with his foolish mouth.”

He is risen!

My promising military career was over. Or so I thought. What had my desire for power and might earned me?

I would spend two more decades building roads, but I could never get those Magi off my mind. Had they really seen a royal star? It must have been humbling for wealthy Persian scholars to look for a king in Jerusalem. Did they ever find him? Did Herod kill the baby? Was he a king? One has a lot of time for questions while chopping trees and moving dirt and rocks.

I did hear that Herod had died not long after that. They said it was his appetite for women that caused a disease. But it would be twenty years before enough people had forgotten about him that I was given a new opportunity as a soldier. And another ten before I was reassigned to Jerusalem. Ironically, I had the same title and rank – custodian. It was in that role, now as an older but still powerful man, that I was

assigned night duty at the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, guarding the tomb of Jesus, who had been crucified on Friday. I knew nothing of him, except that some said he was innocent. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," he had said of the soldiers. Once again, Romans and Jews had collaborated. Strange bedfellows.

Early that Sunday morning, the earth shook and the light flashed. The grave opened – how I did not know. No one found the "dead body" of Jesus. I accepted the bribe to spread the lie that we had been sleeping. I could have been executed, but the chief priests kept their word and stood up for me. I don't know what they said, but I was spared the cross and the sword. Once again, though, I was discharged from the Army. Soon after, the money was stolen from me. Once again, I had nothing for all my years of loyalty to Caesar.

I had to know more. Who was this victim of Roman cruelty who had vanished from that tomb in a blaze of light? I would not rest until I found his followers. If he was alive again, I would not rest until I found him. And then one day it hit me. Could it be? Could he be the one the Magi had come seeking? Could it be that the blaze of light I had seen on that Sunday morning was connected a blaze in the night sky seen from Persia? My spine tingled with excitement.

And could it be that the God of heaven had so ordered my life that I had been part of two miracle stories? To be sure, most of my life had been disappointment and hard work – rejection to reward my faithfulness to the king and to Caesar? Could it be that I had been introduced at his birth and his death to an even greater King? I would not rest without leaving everything behind to seek him. I had bowed before Herod and Caesar and served Rome, but I would seek and find a king worth serving.

I searched for weeks from Jerusalem to Galilee, usually in disguise, but with great determination. Occasionally I would encounter someone who claimed to have seen the crucified man who emerged from the tomb. Finally, following a lead, I ran into a former tax collector named Matthew. I spilled out my story of the star and Herod and the Magi, of Pilate and the tomb and the earthquake and the blaze of light. He listened with rapt attention as his smile grew wide and his eyes grew large. "He is risen!" he said. He told us to meet him in Galilee.

Matthew invited me to join a crowd of 500 who saw him at once. He saw me! His face said, "Yes! I'm the one." I bowed low and worshiped him. And I wondered what might have been the end of this story if I had given up too soon. What might have happened to the Magi if they had not pursued the light they had? Life is full of triumphs and setbacks. What's required of us is both attention and action. If we look up, even in the darkest times, we will see light. If we persevere, we will find hope. Amen.