

# FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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**SERMON:** *King Herod and the Magi*

**SERIES:** *The Christmas Story*

**SCRIPTURES:** *Matthew 2*

**SPEAKER:** *Shaun Kipe*

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*\*Credit to Bible Gateway, John Maxwell; Ken Bailey, Tim Keller, John Ortberg;*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. Two weeks ago, we started our Christmas series called **The Christmas Story (GRAPHIC)**. We're working our way through the major passages of Scripture that tell us the story of Jesus birth.

In the first week, we looked at the ancient prophecy from **Isaiah 9...People walking in darkness have seen a great light...for to us a child is born, a son is given.**

Last week, we looked at **Matthew 1 and the genealogy of Jesus**. Fascinating to see who is included in that genealogy. Women, Gentiles...not the kind of people you may expect to find in an ancient genealogy, but that's just like Jesus, isn't it? He includes messy people in his family, messy people like you and me.

This morning we are turning to **Matthew 2** and this intriguing story about...

## **I. King Herod and the Magi**

or wisemen or kings from a far away land who come searching for Baby Jesus. So, if you have your Bible turn to Matthew 2 and let's just read some of this story and then talk a little bit about it.

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi<sup>a</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> 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.”**

**<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.**

**<sup>7</sup> Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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 too may go and worship him.”**

**<sup>9</sup> After they had 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. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.**

**<sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.**

Ok so first let's just talk a little bit about...

### **A. The Magi**

Let's just kind of clear up a few things about this part of the Christmas story. There are all kinds of questions about exactly who these men were and how they might have come to hear about the Jewish Messiah.

The Greek title for these men is “**magi**”, it’s the same root word, where we get our word **magic** or magician and in the ancient world often meant **astrologer**. Groups of men who studied the movements of the planets and the stars.

And I’m sure, many of you are aware by now, we do not know exactly how many magi there were. Traditional nativity scenes with three magi and songs about “we three kings” simply base this on the number of gifts that were given: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Truth is, we just don’t know how many there were.

Also, important to note, but if you’re reading carefully you’ll realize, Matthew says that when the magi came, Jesus was a child...not a baby. And King Herod’s edict was to kill all children under the age of two. What this means, is that the Magi probably didn’t visit Jesus while he was laying in the manger, with the shepherds gathered round. He was more like a toddler by the time they arrived.

We do know they came from somewhere **East of Jerusalem (PIC)**...

**...Magi<sup>a</sup> from the east came to Jerusalem...**

How did they know about Jesus? It is important to remember that throughout their history, the Hebrews, had on many occasions been ransacked and deported. And every time this happened they took their history and stories with them. And so it’s not far-fetched to imagine their stories about a future King/Messiah being spread throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

It’s kind of neat, scholar Ken Bailey tells a story about in the 1920’s a British scholar, EFF Bishop visited a Bedouin tribe in the Jordan. **Bedouin (PIC)** are middle eastern wandering shepherds, still living the nomadic lifestyle today. This was a Muslim tribe that actually went by the Arabic name **al-Kokabani**. The word “kokab” means planet. And al-Kokabani means “**those who study/follow the planets.**” Bishop asked the elders of the tribe why they called themselves by this name. They told him

that it was because their ancestors followed the planets and traveled to Palestine to show honor to the great prophet Jesus when he was born.

What it was about this particular star or how these magi came to believe it would lead them to a king we do not know. But there are two things I want to highlight from their part of the story...

First one, just kind of on a really basic level, is the importance and value of using

### 1. Multiple Bible Translations

in our Bible study. I've already shared how easily some of the typical images, we have, of the Christmas story are steeped in tradition and not always the most accurate.

Sometimes people get a little bit nervous when they hear about new Bible translations, but for the most part new Bible translations are simply helping us to get a more accurate understanding of Scripture. There is a great example in this story. Look at verses 1 & 2 again.

Some translations of this story say: "**behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem...<sup>2</sup> Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.**

Anybody in here directionally challenged? Have you ever thought about this before? If they were magi from the East (**East of Jerusalem**) and then saw the star in the east (**PIC**), they would have actually gone to India looking for baby Jesus. To get to Israel from the East, which direction do you have to travel? West. The star would have been in the west. Ken Bailey says that, "The key to making sense of this verse is the fact that in Hebrew, the word for **"east"**, also means, **"the rising"**. This is why many translations, aware of the directional challenges say, **We saw his star when it rose...**

So again, just a good reminder, when you get into studying Bible passages, read/become familiar with multiple translations.

On a more practical level, the second lesson I think we learn from the magi...is that you often...

## **2. Find God Where You least Expect him.**

If you are told a king has been born, where would you go looking for him? At the palace, at the places of wealth and power and influence. But that's not where Jesus was found. Jesus was off the beaten path, in the little village, in a stable, on the outskirts of town.

I think this principle still holds true today. That a lot of times we miss out on connecting with God because we've been trained to think that God is located at specific places, on specific days, at specific times. We meet with God at church, on Sunday mornings, during a worship service and so this is where we give him our focused attention. Then we get up and leave and get on with our lives, while God waits around the church, for us to come back next week.

The Israelites had a similar mindset, they built **the Temple**, basically as a home for God...God's house. And started to believe that in some way God's presence lived at the Temple. They went to the Temple to meet with God.

In fact, the Temple itself was divided into three sections and God's presence was most significant or greatest in the innermost room called the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could go in there and only once a year. And, legendarily, when he would go into the Holy of Holies they would tie a rope around his ankle...anyone know why? Just in case he died while he was in there. Then they could pull him out without going in themselves. And so there was this idea that God somehow lived in the Temple.

It is why to this day, for the Jews and even Muslims, there is significant dispute about the land itself in Palestine. Both groups believe that the physical location of the Temple is a most sacred place.

And whether we admit it or not, we tend to think along similar lines. We say that God is everywhere but we live as if he stays at church. We think about God being at church or when we're in church.

And so, we think that its ok to act differently when we are not in church. You've heard people say... "you shouldn't say that in church". It sort of comes from the idea that God lives there and he might hear you. Like, it's ok to say those nasty things at work or at home. Or it's ok to treat people that way at work or at home, as long as you're a good person at church.

The Apostle Paul teaches us something very different, doesn't he?

**1 Corinthians 6 - <sup>19</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you...**

He's saying God is with you, everywhere you go. That should change how you live, act, think, speak...

I remember hearing a story about a young mother who went to seek advice and counseling from her pastor. She said she was just really having trouble making time for God. She said, I used to be able to do this much better before I had children. And it's because she had this perception that connecting with God meant, having a regular long devotional time every morning, but now with young children that just wasn't really possible.

She had never thought that those little human beings to whom she was pouring out her love, and care and service and sacrifice and joy that might actually count as connecting with God.

Maybe this has been your experience as well. You want to seek God, find God, connect with God. But your having trouble doing that. Maybe, you need to rethink how and where your eyes are open for him. **Maybe you've been looking for him in the palace and he's just waiting for you recognize his presence in the stable.**

The story of the magi reminds us that God is often found in the places you least expect...in the ordinary, in the mundane, in the routines of life...sometimes we just need to learn how to have our eyes open to see Him.

Great theologian Frederich Buechner once said, **"There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not..."**

This week, maybe you need to have your eyes open to see God at work, at home, at school, in your back yard, as you walk through your neighborhood, at the business meeting, when your washing dishes...maybe that's your stable this week. And if you can just pause and notice, He's right there. You can connect with Him right where you are!

Ok, let's turn our attention now and talk about King Herod for a few minutes...

### **B. King Herod**

Look back at verse 1...Matthew tells us that the Christmas story took place...**during the time of King Herod.**

If the genealogy of Jesus is the most overlooked part of the Christmas Story, this episode involving King Herod is not far behind. It is not a pleasant part of the

Christmas story to consider, but there are some important lessons for us in this part of the story.

King Herod was a pretty notorious and ruthless individual at this time in history. Part of this seems to come from a sense of paranoia about maintaining **power**. Many of the accounts of Herod from history suggest he lived with a constant sense of suspicion that everyone around him, even those closest to him, were trying to steal his throne. He married at least 10 women, which would be enough to give anybody enormous paranoia, and with these wives he had many children. But sadly to Herod these children were not viewed as “little blessings” but rather as potential political rivals, who would one day be coming for his throne. One story for example tells how he had two of his sons strangled at a fort in Samaria. Later he became suspicious of the political loyalty of his favorite wife, Miraimne, and had her killed. After that he was known to wander the palace calling her name and sending the servants to find her. When they failed to do so, he would have them beaten (Bailey 57).

So, you start to get an image in your mind of the kind of guy Herod was...now, think a little bit more about the question the magi came asking!

**“Where is the one who has been born king...? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”**

When someone comes into your palace asking, “Where is the new King?” It is going to alarm the person actually sitting on the throne (Keller), especially someone with the level of paranoia of King Herod. This is why Matthew tells us that...<sup>3</sup> **When King Herod heard this he was disturbed,**

That’s an understatement. He must have been furious, irate. Herod was King and no one else. It is not too surprising then that he... **gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.**



By the way, last week we talked about how Matthew's writing, while grounded historically, is also steeped with theological meaning. One of the primary purposes of the genealogy is to associate **Jesus** with **Abraham** and **David**. Here we must notice how Jesus is associated with another hero of the Hebrew people, **Moses**. If you recall, when Moses was born there was an edict of child massacre going on against the Hebrews living in Egypt. Moses was saved by being placed in a basket and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. Jesus' birth is being told in parallel to Moses. Shortly after Jesus' birth there is a time of child massacre, and he is saved by fleeing with his family into Egypt. Just as Moses rescued the people of Israel by leading them out of Egypt so too, Jesus is the new Moses, coming to save his people.

Ok, let's bring this a little closer to home. Two kinds of important lessons we can learn from King Herod. First,

### 1. Power Corrupts

Lord Acton, a British historian is credited with this famous saying, **“power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.”**

This is a perfect description of King Herod. He lived with a deep suspicion that those around him were trying to steal his power. And the desire to gain and maintain power and control became the driving force in his life, to the degree that he was willing to do anything necessary. Even if it meant harming people, family members in order to gain and maintain power.

The desire for power and control is incredibly enticing and so alive and well in our world today. If I have power, then I have control. And we will do whatever it takes, manipulation, deceit, violence.

We see this most clearly, in our world today, in relation to a blind pursuit of political power.

*(Credit to John Ortberg & James Hunter for insights in this section on the dangers of political power).*

Sociologist, James Davidson Hunter and author John Ortberg both talk about this concept. Hunter argues that when a society is healthy, many different spheres flourish—including art, education, commerce, and religion. But when societies begin to fracture, everything begins to revolve around politics. Everyone begins to think that **the real way to produce change is to gain political power**. Do you know why that is? The reason for that is that the political sphere has access to **coercive power**.

Like when I tell my kids they may have an hour of screen time and they ask "Why?" I give me what I believe are fairly reasonable reasons for this family guideline, and they keep rejecting them. Eventually I am forced to play the coercive power parent card: "Because I said so."

*This is often the kind of power exhibited in politics. You can pass laws and force people to follow the rules you set, whether they want to or not. You have control through rule-setting. The more fragmented a society is, the more people want political power because then they can make the rules and force other people to do what they want.*

*Political control/power does the work that culture used to do. This is seen in the tendency toward the politicization of nearly everything. Our times amply demonstrate that it is far easier to force one's will upon others through legal and political means than it is to persuade them or negotiate compromise with them. What adds despair to this situation is the presence of resentment, defined by a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge. (James Davidson Hunter, To Change the World)*

Does this not describe the world in which we live? This is the King Herod mentality. Power and influence and rule by control and threats. Political parties that live at the

extremes and can't sit down and have conversation with one another, because they're afraid the other side is going to gain control.

And sadly, the church, seems to have bought into this mindset.

*The increasingly common notion that a church is relevant only to the extent that it's "political" is profoundly misguided. That was precisely the temptation offered to Jesus: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me'" ([Matt. 4:8-9](#)).*

*"Be relevant. Seize political power, and you can change the world." (Ortberg/Hunter)*

**When the desire to gain and maintain power becomes our driving motivation in life, we become manipulative, angry, violent.** That was the way of King Herod, that seems to be the way of the world in which we are currently living, but that is not the way of King Jesus.

This is why the Jews had such a hard time believing Jesus was the true Messiah. They thought he was going to come in power, with a sword and wipe out their enemies. Instead, he came as a baby in a manger. Born in a stable, in a little no name town. He came as the King riding on a donkey. The master who washes feet. He won his victories not by overpowering his enemies, but by laying down his life for his enemies. This is why so many today have trouble believing that the "way of Jesus" is the best way. Because the way of Jesus doesn't often lead to more power and control.

It's fascinating to think, don't let this pass you by, that Jesus invited a tax collector who partnered with the Romans, and he invited a Zealot who hated the Romans (the two ends of the political spectrum) to come together as part of his group of disciples.

*This was not a mistake. They found a unity that changed the world. The love of Jesus. It wasn't on the politics card. It was on the Jesus card. (Ortberg)*

When you begin to place your hope for humanity, in controlling political power, there's a good chance, you're not placing it in Jesus.

*Jesus started a revolution that still changes the world. But it is not rooted in coercive human power; it is rooted in our advent theme for today...divine love. **Sacrificial, grace-filled, servanthood, forgiving, overwhelming love.***

*For human beings, power tends to become an end in itself. Social, economic, and political systems matter. Christians should be devoted to helping those systems reflect God's character and justice. **But it is a matter of deep fact that no particular set of economic or political arrangements can rearrange the human heart and redeem spoiled human character. Jesus alone does this—and if you want him to do this in you, you become his disciple. (Ortberg/Hunter)***

Kings and governments and political leaders and political parties, don't change human hearts. Only the love of Jesus, the true rescuer and Messiah does that.

### **Where are you placing your hope for humanity?**

This leads to the second important lesson we can learn from King Herod. And it has to do with...

#### **2. Ultimate Loyalty**

Notice again the question the magi come asking...it is one of the most disturbing questions we face as human beings: **“Where is the one that has been born King?”**

When you choose to give your loyalty to Jesus...your full devotion, it will come as a major challenge to the other “devotions/kings” you have in your life. Herod was king and no one else could sit on that throne. And if someone tried, it would end in death.

If you want to be king, and someone else comes along saying he is king, then one of you has to give in. Only one person can sit on the throne in your life.

In this sense, we all have a bit of King Herod in each of us. We all have our own little Kingdom, where we can do what we want, when we want. At the core of the human heart is an impulse that says, “No one tells me what to do. I want to be the boss of my own life.”

I love this story I heard one time about a little girl named Shauna. **(PIC OF cute 4 year old girl on tricycle)**. When she was only 4 years old, she loved to ride her tricycle around. But in order to keep her safe her parents had given her boundaries.

But she was a strong-willed child and so she kept trying to push her parent’s boundaries. How far could she go? How much could she get away with?

So her mom told her one time, *“Shauna, there’s a tree right there. And there’s the driveway right here. You can ride your tricycle on the sidewalk in between the driveway and the tree, but you can’t go past that. If you go past that you will get punished. You will get a spanking. I have to be inside. I’ve got stuff to do. But I’m going to be watching you. Don’t go past either of those boundaries, or you’re going to get that spanking.”*

Little Shauna thought about her mother’s words for a moment. Then she backed her tricycle right up to her mom, stood up, pointed to her “spanking zone” and said, *“Well you might as well spank me now because I got places to go.”*

Deep down within each of us is that same attitude. In every human heart, there’s a little Shauna that says, “I got places to go”, there’s “a little King Herod” that wants to rule and that is threatened by anything that may compromise our own sovereignty. We do not want to serve God or others, we want them to serve us. Each of us wants to be captain of our own soul, the master of our own fate.

**What area of your life are you holding onto?** Just like King Herod was holding onto that throne, not willing to surrender it to King Jesus? Is it with your job, your family or a relationship, is it with your hobbies, is it with your political affiliation, is it with your money, a bad habit. “Jesus you can be King here, but don’t come for the throne.”

Jesus talks about this in his own teaching. **“If anyone comes to me but does not hate his family, he cannot be my disciple.”** And don’t misunderstand Jesus. Jesus isn’t teaching us to literally hate our families. He isn’t giving you the green light at Christmas time to say, “well Jesus says, I shouldn’t go to family gatherings.” Rather he is using a metaphorical expression to say that an allegiance to him as Lord, should make all of our other allegiances pale in comparison.

Christmas reminds us that Jesus comes as the true king. Your life will not be what it was created to be until you place him on the throne of your life. You want a life that is marked by peace, and joy and contentment and love and forgiveness... you find that life when you make Jesus King. You must set aside the King Herod in your heart and you must pick up the heart of the Magi...

**“Where is the one who has been born king...? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”**