

**OT Reading: Jeremiah 31:10-34****NT Reading and Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-23**

The long-expected Christ has come. The consummate firstfruit has become available after the very long wait of it. We have now been confronted with the reality of the promise given to us. Like Simeon at the temple, awaiting the consolation of Israel, our hunger is now satisfied.

But this firstfruit, though expected, is not entirely as we expected it. We are not disappointed in it, no. In fact, we come to realize this firstfruit is so much greater than we ever expected it to be.

We knew it would be the fruit of David – a mighty king after God’s own heart. We knew it would be the fruit of Boaz – a generous landowner who redeemed the poor widow. We knew it would be the fruit of Jacob, favored by God over Esau; of Israel, favored by God over Edom.

We might assume in our expectation that Christ would be a king that unites the twelve tribes against the enemies of God, as David did, destroying the threat of the Edomites, the fruit of Esau, and subordinating their world to God with garrisons and outposts throughout their land; subordinating all of Edom to become servants of the king.<sup>1</sup> This is a mighty king!

We might assume in our expectation that Christ would administer justice and equity fairly to all his people, as David did to Israel, and that he would show kindness to the impoverished, as David did to the crippled son of Jonathan, Mephibosheth. That would be a just and compassionate king!<sup>2</sup>

We might expect the type of king that other kings come unto, to bless him and bring gifts, as Toi, king of Hamoth, did to king David.<sup>3</sup> Such a king would be a king of kings!

But in all our expectations, we realize now how grossly we have underestimated the glory of this consummate firstfruit, and who is more than we could have ever hoped for.

The story of the wise men, Herod, the massacre of the innocents, the flight to Egypt, and Jesus’s return to Nazareth is an extremely familiar story. It is conflated with the nativity story so often, I would guess most Americans think the wise men were with the shepherds at the birth, as our nativity scenes suggest. Others more rooted in tradition might recognize the 12<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas, or the Feast of Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, to be the real day the wise men appeared.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 8:13-14

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 9

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 8:9-10

In reality, though, the wise men likely didn't come until several months after Jesus's birth. We know Jesus was presented at the temple in Jerusalem 40 days after his birth, with no attempt to conceal him or hide from king Herod. But my point here is not to point out what some might consider to be pedantic points of trivia, but to establish a proper context to the story. Mary had finished her purification rites and recovered from the trials of childbirth, and could travel.

But in this chapter of Matthew's account of the life of Christ, we do find some interesting things.

The first is that Jesus is approached by gentiles, by foreigners, to be worshipped. Who were the wise men? While not technically described as "kings" in the New Testament, as priests of Persia these magi were also not just priests, as the Jews and Romans thought of them. These magi were protectors, guardians, lords, masters, and prophets – interpreters of dreams, mediators between God and man in the Zoroastrian religion – as their Persian name implies.<sup>4</sup> And so, we don't just have foreign gentiles coming to worship the king of the Jews, we have the high priests of a foreign religion subordinating themselves to the Great High Priest.

These astrologer priests came to bless the king of the Jews with gifts, like Toi, king of Hamoth – but so much more. These "kings" came to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, bringing light out of darkness:

Arise, shine, for your light is come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness covers the peoples; BUT the LORD will arise upon you (true Israel), and his glory will be seen upon you (true Israel), and nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes all around and see; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be carried on the hip. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and exult, because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah, all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.<sup>5</sup>

This king of the Jews, with his light, brought foreign nations from afar to worship him in abject subordination; priests of other religions fell on their face in front of the glory of this prophet, king, and priest.

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<sup>4</sup> See OED at *mobed* in the etymology.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 60:1-6

What else do we see? We see the supposed Jew, king Herod, conspiring against the glory of the LORD. By all historical accounts,<sup>6</sup> King Herod was a nominal Jew who converted for political gain and status. He was no godly king: He had no love for the law of God; no desire for justice or compassion for the poor. It's well documented he murdered many people he felt were threats to the title, "king of the Jews," including his own brother-in-law, Aristobulus III, and even his own children, Alexander and Aristobulus IV.

Other kings did not come to worship him, in fact he was a puppet king, installed and sustained only by the good will of Caesar Augustus. This was no king of kings. This was the plaything of Rome.

This "king of the Jews" was not of the line of David. He wasn't even of the line of Israel. No, this imposter king, Herod the Idumean, was a descendent of the Edomites, the fruit of Esau, the enemies of God, the enemies of Israel. This king had pretended to be the son of David by assuming the title of king, but in reality he was the nation David suborned into servitude.

In so many ways, Herod was anti-Christ – the complete opposite of the true king of the Jews. This king was not the consolation of Israel; he did not bring joy to God's people. He was the lamentation of Israel, causing Rachel to weep for her children, who could not be comforted because her children were no more.

This lamentation fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah, which we heard in both our Old and New Testament readings, but unlike Herod, Christ would turn mourning into joy:

"Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work, declares the LORD, and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope for your future, declares the LORD, and your children shall come back to their own country"<sup>7</sup> – with a true king, not an Edomite king, in whom a new covenant would be established, and for his people every iniquity would be forgiven.

Herod was the type of king you'd expect to get in normal circumstances. He's like so many politicians who advance in power not based on merit, but who they know, and their abilities to compromise righteousness for the sake of "winning."

The long-expected Christ-king, however, would not be like Herod. He would be more like David, but so much more! Like David, Christ was kind to the impoverished cripple; but David could not make Mephibosheth whole again. And more importantly, David could not cancel out Mephibosheth's transgressions and purify his heart. David couldn't

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<sup>6</sup> For histories of Herod the Great, see Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 15 (<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-15.html>); See also, Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, Book 1-2 (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0148>)

<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 31

even do that for himself. “Blot out my transgressions and create in me a clean heart,”<sup>8</sup> David cries to God.

But Christ did not just make the lame to walk, cause the blind to see, heal diseases, purifying bodies to become worthy of the priesthood.<sup>9</sup> Christ would, even more so, purify theirs and our hearts, forgive theirs and our sins, and through his righteousness, make us worthy of entering directly into the true holy of holies – the very presence of God’s full glory!

Christ showed the world that it doesn’t matter what heritage you claim – whether the Edomite Herod converting to Judaism for political gain, or the Israelite Pharisees leaning on their merit and heritage for justification. The true sons and daughters of God are those who have faith **in Christ** – whether you are impoverished and crippled, or you are a king from the orient – and these that have faith in Christ have much more than Mephibosheth’s inheritance of all that was Saul’s. We have the eternal inheritance of everything!

The last thing we see in this history is the refuge of the gentiles in the flight to Egypt. Now, do not think I am going to make this a political commentary on immigration policy – Christ crossing the border into a “foreign country,” living life as an immigrant. Trying to apply this flight to today’s national border conversation forgets that Egypt was not politically a “foreign country” in the Roman Empire. It was in the Roman Empire, just as Judea was. But it was foreign to Jews in the sense that there were non-Jewish governments, customs, religions, and expectations.

And yet it was the grace of God to use the same land out of which he called the Israelites to provide safety and hospitality to the Christ-child, and to Mary and Joseph. How ironic that the same country in which the LORD slew the firstborn son of Pharaoh and the Egyptians because they enslaved God’s allegorical firstborn son, was now the destination for the true firstborn among all creation in his Exodus away from a Jew who wished to slay him.

The Edomites had previously participated slaughter of Israelite babies, dashing them against the rocks.<sup>10</sup> And the prophet Obadiah foretold the destruction of Edom for their violence done to Israel. And now we see the Edomite king of Judea administering the massacre of innocents once again; and God using Egypt to fulfill the prophecy of Obadiah: “Who will bring you down to the ground (Edom)? Though you (Edom) soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 51

<sup>9</sup> See Leviticus 21:16-24

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 137:7-9

<sup>11</sup> Obadiah 3-4

It was in the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in 70AD, which Christ prophesied would happen, that the last of the Edomites would meet their end – from the Herodian heights to utter destruction in a matter of one generation.

Egypt – not Israel – was safe harbor for the true King of Israel from his enemies. This is not just irony; it is the fulfillment of prophecy. It is part of the fulfillment of the prophecy that goes beyond the Messiah being a victor and king for the people of a united Judea and Israel. It is part of the fulfillment of prophecy throughout scripture that in Christ, ALL NATIONS will be blessed;<sup>12</sup> that all nations would worship God;<sup>13</sup> that his saving power would be known among all nations;<sup>14</sup> that all the kings of the earth would fear his glory;<sup>15</sup> that his offspring would be known among nations and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; and all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed.<sup>16</sup>

Christ was not confined to the blood and boundaries of biological Israel. Many Jews thought the Messiah would be – exclusive to the blood relatives of Abraham. But the true King of the Jews was so much more.<sup>17</sup>

What is happening Now, After Jesus Was Born? The promise of salvation is for all nations – for the Jew and the Greek; for the Egyptian and the Israelite; for the Magi and the Levites. He has purified the sons of Levi, refining us like gold and silver with no blemish,<sup>18</sup> so that we like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

May the news of this salvation be spread to all nations, to those who would hear, to those who would repent and have faith in Jesus Christ. And may we be the bearers of this news to all.

**Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord! May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!**

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<sup>12</sup> Genesis 22:18

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 22:7

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 67:1-3

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 102:15

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 61:9

<sup>17</sup> Jeremiah 31:9: His grace is not limited to the twelve biological sons of Jacob, but he even considers Ephraim – who was born in Egypt to an Egyptian mother – his firstborn

<sup>18</sup> Malachi 3:3

<sup>19</sup> 1 Peter 2:5