

Geography of Jealousy: Jerusalem
Matthew 2:1-12
First Sunday after Christmas
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René Rodgers Jensen
First Christian Church
Omaha, Nebraska

Much of what we *think* we know about the wise men is the stuff of myth and legend and tradition. Tradition has taught us that there were three wise men (no doubt because of the three gifts), but the scripture never specifies a number. We have talked and sung of them as three kings, perhaps because of the richness of their gifts, but the scripture never says they were kings. Legend has even given us their names—Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar. But lovely as all these imaginative details are, none of them are based in scripture.

Matthew actually gives us relatively few details about these no doubt remarkable men. They came from the east. They saw a star. Though they were Gentiles, they were apparently familiar enough with Judaism and its prophecies of a coming Messiah to believe that this star heralded the birth of that Messiah. And, of course, they were magi—which means they were wise men or astrologers or astronomers.

And it takes only a tiny bit of reading between the lines to note that even though these were men of great learning and wisdom, they must have been incredibly, astoundingly, heart-stoppingly naïve.

I mean, these guys show up in Jerusalem and inquire naively, “Where is the child who has been King of the Jews?” And who are they asking for directions? Herod, who is the current King of the Jews. In other words, they ask one of the most ruthless rulers in

the Roman Empire, “Where is the baby who is destined to take over your crown?” It is an act of either breathtaking innocence or profound stupidity.

You see, Herod is not a nice man. He is not a bad king—in fact, he did much to rebuild the infrastructure of his country after it was destroyed in an earthquake in 31 BC. He built an entire seaport to increase trade—the seaport of Caesarea Philippi, named after his patron Caesar Augustus. In Jerusalem, Herod built a new market, a new amphitheater, and a new theater, though neither of those culturally Roman innovations would have been popular in this Jewish country. Perhaps it was to placate unhappy Jewish leaders that Herod also erected a new building where the Sanhedrin, the council of Jewish leaders, could convene. Most importantly in Herod’s efforts to win the hearts of his people, in 20 BCE he started to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, which under Herod became a place known throughout the region for its size and its beauty.

With all those building projects, the expansion of his territories, the establishment of a sound bureaucracy, and the development of the country’s economic resources, Herod was a pretty effective king, at least on a material level. The standing of Judea within the Roman Empire and at home was enhanced substantially during Herod’s reign. In many ways he earned the title that he is known by—Herod the Great.

But despite his considerable accomplishments, Herod was distrusted by everyone, and hated by many. For observant Jews, his heritage was suspect. His family came from Idumea, a region bordering Judea that was believed to have been settled by the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. Since Jacob was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, Idumeans were Semitic but not truly Jewish. In fact, Herod’s father had converted to Judaism only when Rome named him the King of Judea. Like his father,

Herod claimed he was a Jew, but his decadent lifestyle, his many violations of Mosaic law and close association with Rome alienated much of the Jewish population.

Plus, despite Herod's many accomplishments as king, he was incredibly ruthless in eliminating any threat to his power, starting with his own family. I tried to sort out how many of his close family members Herod had killed, but there were so many I couldn't keep track. He killed at least one of his wives, his mother-in-law, several of his brothers-in-law, and three or four of his own sons. Caesar Augustus—Herod served, like all puppet kings, at the pleasure of the Roman emperor—seems to have had some respect for Herod's abilities, but was said to have remarked, that he would rather be Herod's pig (*hus*) than Herod's son (*huois*).

Herod was deeply, fiercely protective of his power, and ruthless enough to do *anything* to protect his crown, including killing his own sons and a wife whom he appeared to have loved deeply.

And this is the guy that the wise men go to asking, "Where is the child who is born to take your place?" You will not be surprised to learn that the man who was willing to murder his own children to protect his crown did not scruple to murder others' children. In the part of the Christmas story that we rarely read, because it is too painful, Herod sends his soldiers to kill every boy baby in Bethlehem, the heart-wrenching slaughter of the innocents.

So in our journey through the Geography of Christmas we come to Jerusalem, and the geography of jealousy. Now we need to note here the precise meaning of jealousy. We usually use *jealousy* and *envy* interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing. But

the truth is, there is a subtle but important difference. *Envy* means to covet what someone else has. *Jealousy*, on the other hand, is the desire to keep what you have.

Herod was pathologically, sinfully, evilly jealous of his kingdom and his power and would have done anything to protect it. This is why in the Christmas story; Jerusalem is the heart of the geography of jealousy.

There are, sadly, still Herods in our world. There are still despots who will go to any lengths to protect their power. There are still tyrants who do not hesitate to slaughter the innocents. But what, we might ask, does the Herod of Jesus' birth, or even these modern day Herods have to do with us? Most of us don't feel like we have much power to begin with, and we certainly aren't going to kill anyone to hang on it.

But my hunch is, as much as we don't like to recognize it, there is a little of Herod in all of us. Within all of us is the desire to hold on to what we have, to protect our place in the world. But being a follower of Jesus Christ often demands that we act *against* our own self-interest. That we reject the natural desire to jealously protect our own turf and be willing to selflessly put another's well-being before our own interests.

Several years ago, when we lived in Indianapolis, the city was in the midst of a hotly contested school bond proposal. I will never forget a news story that featured a kind, grandmotherly-looking woman. The reporter asked her if she planned to vote for the bond proposal. The woman replied NO, harshly and angrily. Her children were grown and moved away. She didn't want to pay higher taxes to educate someone else's children. There was nothing in this school bond for her. It was a legitimate point—just not a very Christian point, though I am sure this woman considered herself a Christian. It was, on a much smaller scale, exactly the same kind of self-interest that guided Herod. It

was exactly the same kind of self-interest that guides many of us as we make political or economic, or even religious decisions.

The Herod in us asks, “What’s in this for me?” The Christ in us asks, “What’s in this for the least among us?” The Herod in us asks, “Will I lose anything by this?” The Christ in us asks, “Will those who are most in need gain by this?” The Herod in us asks, “Will I be better off?” The Christ in us asks, “Will the community be better off?”

In this season when we celebrate the birth of a child, maybe we need to let the example of another child guide us away from our inner Herod. Mark Shulist, a critically ill nine-year-old, was offered a chance to make a dream come through by the Make-A-Wish Foundation. We’ve all heard the stories of a child who achieved his or her dream to meet a celebrity or shake the hand of the president, or go to Disney World.

Now if there is ever a time when I think we would all agree it is morally acceptable to think only of yourself, it is if you are a nine-year old child who is dying of brain cancer. But Mark’s wish wasn’t for himself—it was for others. He asked the Make-A-Wish Foundation to build something for his friends: a rock-climbing wall on the playground of his elementary school. What an incredible act of love and generosity—and this is how Mark is remembered. That his life, short as it was, was not about himself, but about others.

How will we be remembered? For the Herod in us, that jealously guarded our own self-interest that put our own wants and desires first? Or for the Christ in us, who like our Savior himself, is willing to put others’ needs before our own?