

“Herod and the Wise Men,” Matthew 2:1-12 (Second Sunday of Advent, December 10, 2017)

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

<sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> ‘ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

<sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

## PRAY

In the weeks leading up to Christmas this year we are studying the first chapters of the gospel of Matthew, and we are in chapter two this week. Here we read about King Herod and the wise men. If you grew up in church certainly these characters are familiar to you.

I want us to study this passage against the backdrop of one particular question: how do you know if you’re following Jesus? How do you know whether or not you are really, truly, a Christian?

At one point Jesus says something that ought to make every regular church-going Mississippi Christian stop and think: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ “And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ ” Matthew 7:21-23.

There will be shock on the day of judgment – shock from people who for decades thought they were following Jesus, thought they were Christians, only to hear Jesus say, “I never knew you.”

How can we know whether or not your following Jesus? I want to show us two things from this text: first, what Herod has to teach us about following Jesus. Second, what the wise men can teach us about what it means to follow Jesus.

First, what Herod can teach us about following Jesus. King Herod was also known as Herod the Great, and not every king got a title like that. He was by all accounts a very influential and successful king. His reign was marked by remarkable building projects such as the temple and the temple mount in Jerusalem, the ruins of which you can see to this day. The western wall, also known as the “wailing wall,” in Jerusalem was a part Herod’s construction program. Herod’s reign was marked by an extended period of peace in that part of the world, which is no small feat today and it certainly wasn’t a small accomplishment back then. He was an able politician. He wasn’t a Jew, nor was he a Roman, but he managed to rule over the Jews at the will and pleasure of the Romans for more than thirty years.

Now, let’s read verses 1-3: “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him ...”

Why was Herod troubled? In Judea at that time there was tremendous messianic expectation. The people of Judea believed that at any time a man sent by God would come into the world, reestablish the Davidic monarchy in Jerusalem, and drive the Romans out of their land (and with them their lackeys like Herod). A cottage industry had grown up around the messianic expectations. That’s why Herod can go to the chief priests and teachers of the law and ask, “Where is the Christ (Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah” – they mean the same thing: “anointed one”) to be born?” and the priests don’t have to say, “Herod, give us a week, let us do some research, and let us get back to you.” They know where they Christ is to be born, they know the prophecy of Micah 5: the Christ will be born in Bethlehem.

Herod was an able administrator, a good politician, and he was also ruthless. We know for certain he murdered one wife and several sons, numerous other close associates, and probably thousands of other assorted people. So when the wise men come to Herod and ask, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” Herod is ready to kill this king, even if it turns out the king is a newly born baby. He’s ready to kill a lot of babies to make sure he gets the right one. Herod is trouble, and all Jerusalem is troubled with him, and it doesn’t even matter whether or not Herod actually believes that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem – all that matters to Herod is that some people might think this child is the Christ because that means *this child is a threat to his throne*.

Jesus, just by being born, was a threat to King Herod – a threat to his throne, his authority, to his power. And here’s what Herod can teach us: you’ll know you’re following Jesus when you are a threat to other people.

You say, “A threat? What’s that supposed to mean?” Obviously (or at least I hope it’s obvious) following Jesus never means you need to be a threat to someone’s physical safety or well-being. Our calling as believers is to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, to love our neighbors, and to even love our enemies.

But that doesn't mean we are not to shake things up and be the kind of people who never rattle people's cages. Jesus certainly did that. Later in the gospel of Matthew we read this: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." Matthew 10:34-35. Jesus got people upset.

And anyone who truly follows Jesus will do that as well. Paul makes an unconditional statement about this in 2 Timothy 3:12: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted ..." That doesn't mean if you're not going to jail or getting fired then you're not a Christian, but it does mean that all true followers of Christ will stir up opposition, and they'll stir up opposition by being threats to the people around them even while they are loving them.

But how will Christians "threaten" people? Two ways: *first, a follower of Jesus will threaten comfortable, cultural Christians.* Across the country, the percentage of people who identify as Christians is declining. But it's still pretty high here in Oxford. However, many of them are cultural Christians – they identify as Christians because their parents or grandparents took them to church, or maybe they just feel like they need some kind of spiritual heritage and they're not familiar enough with Buddhism or Islam or Judaism so they say they are Christians. And, unlike just about anywhere else in the country, there's a large number of people in Oxford who still go to a church regularly but couldn't tell you what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. By their own admission, they haven't been born again, haven't experienced the transformation that the Holy Spirit brings.

They are cultural Christians – I think there used to be far more of them in the United States than there are now, their number is declining – but they are still there.

And a true follower of Jesus Christ threatens the comfort of a cultural Christian. You can see this happen at all ages. In middle school and high school, a true follower of Jesus Christ will not use language the same way so many of his friends at school do, he won't look at the same things on his phone, he won't get drunk, she won't gossip and malign other girls in school, she won't dress the same way as other girls, they will not believe sex is ok outside of marriage. When that happens, the other kids will feel threatened – their idea of what "normal" kids just having fun is gets upset, and it probably will arouse opposition. Maybe secretly a few of them will admire you, but for the most part you'll be left out of the cool crowd, and you might even get harassed for being the "good, Christian kid," even by other kids who go to church. Even by other kids who claim to be Christians. You're threatening their comfort, and they won't like it, but that's what happens when you really follow the Lord Jesus.

It happens to adults who really follow Jesus, too. If that's you, then the other adults who claim to be Christians will notice that you don't spend all your money on yourself and your family the way they do. They'll notice that you live below your means, that you don't take all the trips they do and buy all the things they do (even though they know you could probably afford it). Other parents will notice that church attendance is a priority for you and your family, so you just don't do certain things on Sundays, and they will notice you do not let your kids do everything their kids do. When they notice this, they won't like it. They will feel threatened, and you will face opposition. They may never say anything to your face about it, but behind your back ... They

may never say anything to your face about it, but forget about getting invited to all the parties, to certain Grove tents, to certain hunting camps. You've threatened their comfort, and they don't want you around anymore.

Someone who is really following Jesus will not just go with the flow, and I'll put it like this: if you're not taking the hit somewhere in your life in Oxford, Mississippi for being a Christian, then do you really think you're following Jesus at all?

*Second, a follower of Jesus will threaten the self-righteousness of those who aren't Christians.* Too often those of us who go to church are guilty of thinking that those outside the faith are all bad people who have morals. They are just waiting for an opportunity to do some kind of evil – to kidnap a child or burn down a house. But of course that's not the case. You can find people outside of Christianity who are really good people. Read the *Oxford Eagle* pretty much any day of the week and you will see all kinds of good deeds being done by people in our community who do not believe in Jesus. They don't comprise a majority of the population of Oxford, but there are a lot of them, and if they didn't serve the way they do our community would be a whole lot worse place to live. So, as Christians, we should give thanks to God for all the good done in our midst even when it's not done by people who follow Jesus.

But because of all the good they're doing in our community, they can't help it – they begin to think of themselves as the good people. They think, "Look at what we're doing. We are the ones who care, we're part of the solution, we're on the right side of history." And just as naturally, they begin to look down on those whom they think are part of the problem, those who stand in the way of progress. And for a lot of them they think Christians are the problem, especially Christians who believe the Bible and have a historic theology like what we teach at Grace. We are the backward ones, the judgmental ones, the condemning ones, and so they don't like us.

What's happened? *They've become self-righteous.* Self-righteousness means thinking that you are a good person because of what you do. Typically we think of self-righteousness as a problem only for religious people who think they're better than everyone else because they go to church or because they don't drink or whatever, but it's actually a problem for everyone. Religious people and irreligious people struggle with this, because everyone naturally wants to feel like they are one of the good guys, not one of the bad guys. Look at all the anger spewed on social media, if you dare, and 95% of it comes from self-righteousness. It comes from people saying, "I'm on the right side of this issue, you're not; therefore, I'm righteous and I'm entitled to and at some level am even required to condemn you for your views."

But what does the Bible say? The Bible says we are all the bad guys. The Bible says we are all sinners, we've all fallen short. In Romans 3:10 we read: "None is righteous, no, not one ..." and in Romans 3:12: "All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

If you are really following Jesus and you get around some of these hard-serving unbelievers in Oxford, you will threaten their self-righteousness because they will see that since you're following Jesus so many of the things they care about – like taking care of the poor, like

eliminating racism in all its forms, making sure children get a good education, and zero tolerance for sexual harassment – you care about, too. They’ll see you’re on the same page when it comes to those issues.

But they’ll also see that you’re a Christian. A Bible-believing Christian who believes in sin, and Jesus, and heaven, and hell. They’ll see your kind and thoughtful. They’ve been conditioned to think Christians are the bad guys, but they get around you and you’re not. And it will threaten their self-righteousness. It will rock their world, because they don’t have a category for you.

You know, when I think of Christmas, I typically think of fires in the hearth, and turkeys, and stockings, and Bing Crosby and the Carpenters, and happy times with family. And that’s all great, but that’s not the biblical message of Christmas. The biblical message of Christmas is God breaking into the world in the person of his Son and turning everything upside down. When Mary found out she was carrying the Messiah in her womb, we read that she began to sing, and part of her song went like this: “He [the Lord] has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; <sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” Luke 1:51-53.

Following Jesus means you will rattle cages, means you will turn things upside down, and means you will be a loving threat to how other people view the world. Is that true of you?

Now, I can completely imagine a situation where you’re a Christian, and you’re really trying to follow Jesus, but you don’t feel like you’re a threat to other people because you are so overwhelmed with the circumstances of your life. If you’re a mom and you have a four year old and a two year old and a newborn at home, you’re in a season of life where you are just trying to keep your head above water and it won’t feel like you’re turning the world upside down with your discipleship. You feel like your life is turned upside down anew every day. There are lots of seasons of life like this. It can’t always feel like your life is a threat to others. Sooner or later it must, but it won’t always. And this is where the wise men are helpful.

Second, what the wise men can teach us about following Jesus. Matthew is the only gospel writer who mentions the wise men. We don’t know much about them – probably they were astrologers of some type from Babylon or Persia. They weren’t kings – so the Christmas carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are” is wrong. We do not even know how many of them there were – we only know Matthew lists three gifts, but we don’t know that there were only three wise men.

But those three gifts tell us a lot. The wise men brought Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were precious gifts, expensive gifts. Gold, we all know what that is – a valuable precious metal. Frankincense and myrrh were both very rare and hard to come by resins, or sap, that certain trees in Arabia produced. Typically you burned the frankincense and it put off a pleasing aroma, while myrrh was primarily known for its use in embalming dead bodies.

So what can we learn from the wise men about how you can you know you are truly following Jesus? *You can know that you are following Jesus when you give him your best.*

By this I don't mean that you can only know you are following Jesus if you give away all your money. Giving away some money, I'm sure, will be part of it. I mean that you take whatever is most precious to you and most important to you and offering it to God.

So go back to the mom with a bunch of young children in the home. If you want to know you're following Jesus, it's not enough to just love them in that situation. People who aren't Christians love their children. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" Matthew 5:46. Certain good things, like raising your children, are common to all people, not just Christians.

Instead, you must be sure you are giving your children, who are your best, back to Jesus. It's so tempting to raise your children so that worldly success – whether it's academic, or social, or athletic – is the goal. Imagine you have a daughter in high school and she's been trying to get into this certain college, this certain Ivy League college. She's worked so hard for it for years. And one day a letter comes in the mail and says, "Your daughter has passed all of our tests. Your daughter has passed all of our scrutiny, and your daughter has been admitted into the finest school in the country with regard to this or that thing."

She has been accepted into one of the finest schools in the country. How do you feel as a parent? Do you just say, "Oh, that's nice. Maybe she'll have better job prospects"? No. Not at all. There's a deep satisfaction. You never forget that letter. You feel justified in all that you've ever done as a parent. It all feels worth it.

But if you're giving your best to Jesus, that kind of satisfaction (while it would be great to get) can't be the goal. You know what it has to be? *It must be raising your children above all else to love God and his neighbor.* That's what it looks like to give your best to Jesus when it comes to your kids, and sometimes the things that will teach your kids to love their neighbors will actually work against them attaining worldly success. Those things will conflict, and when they do which side will you choose?

Whatever your best is, whether it's your kids, your grades, your marriage, your job, your money: are you simply using them the way the world does, getting success the way the world defines it, or are you offering it all back to him? It's so easy to get the two confused.

Elisabeth Elliot tells a story about Jesus and Peter – it's just a story, it's not in the Bible, don't go look it up, it's just a story, but it illustrates this truth well. Jesus went to the disciples one morning and said, "Pick up a stone, and follow me." So, Peter picks up a pebble, a little rock he can carry without effort, and follows Jesus. And after a few hours of walking Jesus stops the disciples, tells them to take out their stones, and he turns them all into bread and says, "Enjoy your lunch." So Peter has this Lord's Supper wafer for lunch and is disappointed.

After they eat, Jesus says to the disciples, "Pick up a stone, and follow me." So Peter thinks he has it figured out. He finds a boulder and somehow manages to hoist it up on his shoulders and he carries it while he follows Jesus. And it's just killing Peter, but he's thinking about how good this will be for supper. And finally, after several hours, Jesus calls a halt beside a stream, and he tells his disciples, "Throw your stones into the water." And Peter looks at Jesus as if to say,

“Why?” and Jesus, before Peter can say a word, says, “Peter, who were you carrying the stone for?”

I am constantly convicted at about eight o'clock at night when I've worked hard all day and I'm tired yet my kids still want something for me, want me to do this last thing for them before bed, because in that moment my first thought is often, “Haven't I done enough today? Haven't I given enough of myself? Can't I just be left alone?” I think that, and I'm convicted, because I realize at that moment that though I would have said I was living the day for Jesus, I'd really been living for myself. I'd been carrying the stones for me, not Jesus.

People who follow Jesus give him their best, and it's a constant struggle to do that. We resist it so readily. So how can we give Jesus our best? *Only by constantly remembering how God gave his best to you.*

Look back at the wise men. They offered Jesus gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. For centuries commentators have pointed out that these three gifts were not only extremely valuable but also were given to symbolically reflect the ministry of Jesus on earth. The gold was fit for a king and the frankincense when burned wafted up to heaven, like the prayers of a prophet.

But the myrrh symbolized Jesus' role as our priest. You know what a priest does? All religions throughout all human history have had men or women who serve as priests to serve as intermediaries between God and mankind. The priests would offer up the sacrifices on the altar to make sure God was pleased with the people of the community.

But Christianity, strictly speaking, has no priests. I'm not a priest, I'm a pastor. We have no priests because Jesus is our priest. “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Hebrews 4:14-15.

And by giving Jesus the myrrh, the wise men showed how Jesus would be our priest, how he would ensure that God is pleased with man. There was only one way he could: he had to die on the cross in our place for our sins.

The Christmas hymns, by the way, are full of this message. “Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king; peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled . . . Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.”

God gave his best, his one and only Son, to you. You did not deserve it, you could not deserve it, but he did. Now he calls you to follow him, and to the degree you see God giving his best for you, you'll trust him to give your best to him. Your life will be transformed into a life that lovingly threatens the worldviews of the people around you.

That's what it looks like to follow Jesus. Will you receive your king? Will you trust him as your great and merciful high priest in the heavens? **PRAY**