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*Immanuel Lutheran Church*

*Wichita, Kansas*

Asked whether or not Jesus Christ is a king, of course we answer, “Yes.” Looking back over Advent & Christmas, count how often we heard from Scripture and sang in our hymns that the child born of the virgin came to be our king! Why, Christmas itself began to unfold when the warrior-angel of God spoke into the ear of Mary that the son she would bear was destined to take his seat forever on the throne of King David. That Mary’s son was born to be our king would also cost her much, as we heard last week from Simeon:

*“This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against – and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.”*

How easy it is easy for you and me, on the other hand, merely to voice the lyrics of Christ’s royalty: “...Let earth receive her King...” “...Glory to the newborn king...” But if calling him our king requires nothing of us, perhaps it also means nothing to us. I suspect that quite often the notion that Jesus is our King is a picture in our mind without an explanation.

The Feast of the Epiphany and the season that it initiates offer us much help toward understanding & embracing Jesus as our King. But first, we must avoid the useless “Epiphany detours” Christians often take into questions that Holy Scripture does answer or ask: How many magi were there? From where did they come? Were they kings? What were their names? On all these points St. Matthew remains stubbornly silent; what makes the magi important is the question they ask:

*“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and have come to do him homage.”*

This is not a story about them; it is about King Jesus, whose royalty the magi announce; and inadvertently they announce it to an imposter claiming to be King of the Jews. Matthew’s Gospel is all about kingship: It begins with the genealogy of King David and his sons. Later, Jesus begins the final stage of his ministry by riding into Jerusalem as the king foretold by the prophet Zechariah. After Jesus’ arrest Pilate asks him, “Are you the king of the Jews, to which Jesus replies, “You yourself say so.” Three times, as he hangs on the cross, his mockers will

shout the truth in spite of themselves, calling him the “King of Israel.” But even before his passion, Christ tells a parable of the Last Judgment in which he is the king before whose throne all appear to learn their eternal destiny.

What and where is Jesus’ Kingdom? It is, as he told Pilate, not “of this world.” Now, Jesus most certainly did NOT say that his Kingdom is not IN this world. It is here in this world, and if you believe this you are at this very moment living in it as a citizen of heaven.

But unlike the kingdoms OF this world, God’s Kingdom was not inspired or brought about by someone’s earthly ambitions to dominate others. Nor does God use troops & money & tanks & politics to build it. The Kingdom of Heaven begins to grow when the Promise of Salvation comes to sinners like you & me, and works in us repentance & faith. God’s Word leads us to confess our sinfulness, and the Holy Spirit leads us to confess Christ to be our Savior.

Then, the power of this Gospel within us is such, that it begins transforming our daily outward behavior, to be less like ourselves and more like Christ. Each of us, wherever we go to work or play and interact with other human beings, now sees himself and those around him differently. And this changes how we act toward them.

Moreover, while in each of us this inner rebirth is taking place and changing our external behavior, we also discover ourselves to be members of God’s community of forgiveness; we belong to the Body of Christ, and thus to each other. If you are a disciple of Jesus you are automatically in fellowship with his other disciples; he offers no one the option of embracing him apart from his Church – the community that, for all its flaws, is still by grace his Body.

Now, the magi naturally know nothing about the sufferings of Christ to come and of his resurrection; or about the gift of the Spirit and the Sacraments of Christ. But what the magi do perceive is this: The royal dominion of this child born in Bethlehem, the reign of this baby to whom a star has somehow led them, is over them and us all. By their actions the magi show that theirs has not been merely a reconnaissance mission. If it were, they would have simply documented the birth of this foreign sovereign and returned home with their report. Instead, as far removed from Jesus in earthly terms, they kneel before him and offer gifts whose material value show how earnestly they are offering their adoration and submission.

In the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, it matters not on what continent we live or under what kind of earthly government we live, what language we speak or what color our skin. When Christ comes to rule as king in the hearts of his disciples, all national and social definitions vanish. When the Holy Spirit calls us also to live by faith in the community of forgiveness, ethic and

social differences mean nothing. The magi are God's first sign after the birth of Jesus that his Son, born to be the King of Israel, has come to be Lord and King over *people of every tribe and tongue and people and nation*.

Now, in one way all this means that no earthly ruler need view the rule of Christ as a threat to his own regime. God's is not a material kingdom, built with earthly means out of human ambition, but one built from God's forgiving grace, and characterized by his subjects' humble service to one another. When Christ comes to be our King, he does not come to take the place of civil governments.

Nevertheless, King Herod instantly senses an attack on his reign, and so he... Well, go find a better example of absurd behavior! When the magi ask the location of the newborn king, and the Bible scholars point to divine prophecy about Bethlehem, this should keep Herod from trying to defy the designs of God. But instead, he now foolishly hopes that, having (a) the name of the right town and (b) the approximate date of birth, he will be able to send troops into Judea and stop the prophecy from coming true. How dumb is that?

What a sad tale then follows! The Friday before last – December 28, was another Church festival – the minor Feast of the Holy Innocents. It was not, needless to say, a minor event for all those mothers.

Which leads us to this question: Did Herod have to fear the coming of King Jesus? In a couple of weeks we shall sing an ancient Latin hymn by Coelius Sedulius that cries back through time and says to the butcher of Jerusalem:

*Cruel Herod, why so filled with fear / That God as king is drawing near?*

*He steals no mortal realm below / Who on us heavenly rule bestows.*

That's right: No earthly ruler has to fear a Christ whose ambition is to take from them the power of civic government. But on the other hand, the same King Herod the Great who authorized the killing of all those infants, had much earlier committed murder to gain his throne and claim the title, "King of the Jews." Every ruler in every nation should know that the same Christ who came in lowly form at Bethlehem, shall one day come in glory to be our Judge. And when he does, every ruler who, with no fear of God, acts as if he were God; every cruel & unjust king or governor who for the sake of his own ambitions shows contempt for the lives of those he rules, shall answer for it on Judgment Day. So, in this sense, Herod was exactly right – he had much to fear from the baby Jesus.

But not even such a ruthless tyrant as he could stop the coming of God's Kingdom, and even

Holy Innocents Day on December 28 is just as much a joyous festival as Epiphany, for we know that those children who died on account of Christ were later redeemed by Christ, who died & rose for them. The reign of Christ is not only above all earthly rule; it is also more powerful than death itself. And so, we like the magi kneel before Jesus Christ and offer our very selves to God as living sacrifices of thanksgiving for bringing us out of

*...the dominion of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*

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