

## **CHRISTMAS AS THE GOSPELS SEE IT - KINGDOMS CLASHING**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 10, 2017

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11; Matthew 2:1-12

The four gospels handle the story of Jesus' birth in very distinct ways. Take Mark for instance. If you're looking for a nice Christmas story with angel choruses and a holy family, a stable in Bethlehem and the friendly beasts, well, skip Mark and go to Luke. Mark's story begins with John the Baptist, a wild man, eating locusts and organic honey out in the wilderness, preaching a gospel of repentance and drawing a crowd from the Judean countryside. No mention of Bethlehem at all. No interest in paternity issues. No angel visitant.

Mark's silence on Jesus' birth gives you no story that you can read to the children around the fireplace on Christmas Eve because Mark's nativity story is a nothing burger... no story there.

There are none of the moments in Mark that there are in Luke to invoke the same reaction as the other synoptics do, with shepherds keeping watch by night, and Wise Ones, pondering their star charts and heavenly movements, and who come in search of a messiah.

Now those are stories that create awe and wonder for all ages. But Mark... Mark has no time for children's versions of the birth narratives at all. Nary a mention of the night journey, or the kindly inn keeper, or even the plot against the innocents.

Evidently Mark is not at all impressed at the persuasive power of a mystical birth, nor of the necessity of giving us the genealogical background on Jesus' family, biological or otherwise.

Mark is in a hurry. His favorite word is "Immediately," ...Immediately the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness." "Immediately, the disciples dropped their nets and followed him." "Immediately the leprosy left the unclean man." "Immediately the paralytic, picked up his palate and walked."

Everything is on the express tracks in Mark's account. No bothering with a cozy story of Jesus' birth. Nativity stories are not as important as passion narratives to Mark and so his eyes are fixed on Calvary, and the events of that location expressed as succinctly as possible. Time is short, he suspects. The kingdom is at hand. Repent and believe... immediately!

Matthew, by contrast, writing a few years later than Mark, around 80 or 90 A.D., is in much less of a hurry. He is focused on linking Jesus to the prophetic expectations of the Old Testament, and to draw parallels between Jesus and Moses. It's Matthew that is the focus of our lesson today. An altogether different writer than Mark in purpose. Matthew, is very interested in the paternity, birth, and pedigree of Jesus.

He begins his version with a genealogy that lifts off with David, the shepherd king, the first messianic figure in Israel's history, and so he makes a crucial link at the outset with Israel's glory days, the kingship, and royal line, and connection to Jerusalem.

And it's worth noting that Matthew is political in a way that makes us uncomfortable. Because Matthew places Jesus' birth squarely in a line of conflict between the power of God and the power of the Empire.

You can tell from the outset that he is intent on making us squirm. Listen again to his introductory words...

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he that is born King of the Jews?'"

From the very beginning Matthew has pitted kingdom and Christ against one another. In one sentence he has named Jesus, claimed him as a connection to King David by mentioning Bethlehem,

named Jesus' primary opponent at the time of his birth, Herod the king, a quisling who had made an uneasy peace with Rome, but who had sold out his own people. And last but not least, he has placed on the lips of the Wise Men the announcement that this one that they are seeking is to be the King of the Jews... and this they say to the King of the Jews. *Fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy ride.* Warren Carter in his commentary on Matthew entitled **Matthew and the Margins** subtitles this period of hostility that begins Jesus' ministry as, "The Empire Strikes Back," mostly because of Herod's response to the duping of the Wise Men, and Herod's decision to kill all the male children in Judea two years old or younger. You can do that if you're Herod -order missiles, or swords or troops facing a demilitarized zone to cross over, and wipe out a whole generation because you have an itch you need to scratch or an insecurity you need to allay.

You know I am always a bit puzzled by people who come to church and never want any connection to the political movements and social events that are shaping our lives. Don't get me wrong. I don't imagine that anyone comes here to worship in the hopes that I will have some unique commentary on the political events of the day that will just hit the spot; especially in a time when we are already so fragmented and divided as a nation on precisely issues of accountability, truthfulness, integrity, and character. The gospel is not meant to uphold the reign of Herod or of Caesar but to point out the places of conflict with the Kingdom of God.

My preaching professor in seminary, the late Edmund Steimle, once said that if a sermon begins in the Bible, stays in the Bible, and ends in the Bible, it's not Biblical.

His point, of course, was that if the scriptures have nothing to say to modern life, values, faith, and how we live our lives then it is an irrelevant book, a secondary resource devoted to an element of religious life segregated from our daily experience where we most need help to understand what the scriptures are telling us and asking of us.

Preaching and worship are meant to be "incarnational" en-fleshed, as it were, and that means that our relationships, our work, our families, our marriage, our life together as a city and as a nation, in fact as nations accountable to a Creator God, require us to stir in ample amounts of social and political accountability along with personal accountability if we are to claim that God is sovereign over all nations and people, and Lord of our life.

Warren Carter in his commentary lays out the case that kingdoms are clashing from Matthew's perspective and it's there throughout the gospel from the genealogy that connects Jesus to King David, to the confrontation that leads the Wise Ones to Herod's palace, and then leads them away as Jesus, Mary, and Joseph make a hasty retreat to Egypt (ever so subtly linking Jesus to Moses).

And why does Matthew notice that and none of the others, that trip to Egypt for the Holy Family? Because Moses confronted the political power of his day when he went to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go," thus instituting what would be the most sweeping reform of Egyptian tax law and socio-economic structure in its history. Matthew remembers it because Matthew sees the story of the gospel as one in which the powers of earth are challenged by the power of God.

What is the gospel that Matthew wants us to hear and see? It is a gospel that is particularly good news to the poor, the outcast, the stranger, the falsely accused, the people that Warren Carter describes as "on the margin", on the margin of life, on the margin of faith, on the margin of hope.

If you want the key that unlocks the gospel that Matthew begins to tell in his nativity story, the gospel that underlies the genealogy, the reason for the Wise Men making their cameo appearance in the story, the challenging of the powers that held God's people in subjugation which you hear again and again in Jesus' confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees, you have to read 25 chapters into Matthew's gospel where, in one fell swoop, all is revealed in a single image, a single parable that is more like a keystone that holds the rest of the story together.

Jesus uses a parable to make his point. You remember... it's an image of all the nations gathered before the throne of God, at the end of time, and the Son of Man is seated on that throne ready to render judgment upon the Creation and all of us. The king divides the people, like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And the sheep he puts on the right and the goats he herds onto the left.

He says to the sheep,

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

And you know how the parable unfolds from this point on. The sheep on the right have no idea that they have ever seen the Lord in this way, or done anything deserving of a testimonial dinner, a gold watch, or a reward that would thank them for all the good that they have done over the years to the "least" of God's people.

Likewise, when the hammer comes down and the folks who have been all self-absorbed and unaware of the ones who are in need right in front of them complain that they shouldn't be held accountable for not recognizing the Lord, because if they had known that it was the Lord they would have done something. Which, of course, is the "gotcha" in this whole story.

The meaning of the parable is that God never comes to us dressed like God. God comes to us in the broken down, screwed up, tangled web and messed up world that we're in, looking very much like the kind of person you would otherwise pass by in the subway or leave sleeping in the street, the poor man or woman who is just trying to get by day by day and doing so taking one step forward sometimes and two steps back.

Naked, alone, sick, in prison, hungry, thirsty, poor, up on false charges. That's how Jesus looks.

Or... he looks like a poor kid born in some makeshift maternity ward in some run down birthing place. A child looking very much like every other child, so much so that when Herod gets word that he will not be hearing back from the Wise Men, he orders the slaughter of the innocents, the kind of thing Bashar Assad would order against Syrian babies, bombing neo-natal units and hospitals where children are lying-in.

He looks like Puerto Rican kids in certain villages not getting enough calories each day, living without electricity since the hurricanes came through leveling their school, and wiping out their homes.

He looks like a kid in the Bronx where the rat poison and the Cheerios are side by side in the kitchen cabinet and his mother doesn't always remember to close the door and lock it.

Matthew's version of the gospel is that if we are going to be properly ready to welcome the one for whom we are looking – at the end of these Advent days, we should not look too far. The one for whom we await is one we might otherwise take for granted.

You may not be aware, but over the last eight weeks as the result of a fall that I took, I have had a number of medical interventions. Three visits to the emergency room in three different states, one preceded by a call to 911 and delivery by an ambulance. Two surgical interventions to reconstruct my right eye orbit. Six days in the hospital, three days here in New York and three days in Delaware. Three CT scans, an MRI, more draws of blood and testing and time spent in doctors' offices than I really want to remember.

I have leaned on people to help me, who've offered. They've gotten me to the doctor's office, brought me dinner, gone shopping for me, the doorman even stopped up twice to check on me to make sure that I was still breathing. Given my vivid imagination I have even thought once or twice that maybe I wasn't going to make it.

I am so grateful to our pastors and those of you who have reached out to offer help and did so. And all of this coming at the busiest time of the year.

At first I wasn't sure what I should say to you today about the way Matthew expresses the gospel until I realized I was watching the gospel proclaimed in the actions of people well known to me. *But Lord, when did we see you hungry, they asked, or thirsty, or alone, or sick?* And once I realized that I was looking at the gospel enacted, I realized that my own congregation was preaching to their pastor the gospel that strengthens our lives. Sometimes that's how God works... through us, through you.

I'm grateful to the late Fred Craddock who helps us understand who it is that we are waiting to see revealed at the end of these Advent days, by shining a light not on the *beginning*, but on the *ending* of Matthew's gospel, that judgment scene that is the key to understanding Matthew's view of what is the gospel.

It all comes down to this, says Craddock<sup>1</sup>. There is ultimately one final question the way Matthew sees it. One question.

You will forgive me if I say that I feel judged by this question, and maybe you do too.

I'm concerned about my own accountability for the life I have led... aren't we all? And it all comes down to this one question.

When history ends and every person is openly and clearly seen under the light which makes no shadow. When the Son of Man comes and we all have to stand and give account of ourselves we must answer one question.

And what is that ultimate question? The one that is on God's mind, about us?

Craddock puts it this way, "If we know that we are going to face a final exam of one question and we are told by the examiner what that question is to be, is it not reasonable to suppose that one question would gather to itself the interest and the energies and the concerns of all of us?" Congress, church, the international community, North Korea, the U.S., the rich, the poor, Republicans, Democrats, you... me? You would think so. You would think if there were only one question in which God is interested, you ought to be focused on that one thing.

And here is the question: How did you respond to human need? That's it. That's the question. How did you respond to human need?

I was alone. I had no one in the world. My husband had died. My children lived in another state and I stayed in that empty apartment all those years. Did you or did you not come?

I was in Rikers' Island for three years, cut off from society for what I did. Convicted yes, but still a human being. Did you or did you not visit?

I was hungry, peering into a world of banquets and diets. I saw more food flushed down disposals than my entire family had eaten. Did you offer me anything to eat?

I was without clothing, looking into the shop windows, gazing at the wardrobes of the world. I waited for styles to change hoping for an old coat or dress. Did you offer me anything to wear?

I was a stranger, new at the job, new in this country, new in the city, new on the street, new in the building. I didn't know a soul. Did you introduce yourself to me?

A long time ago, moved by this scene in Matthew 25 and feeling the burden of that one question, Christian leaders made a list of sins. These were the seven deadly sins. And in the list of seven they included one which in the Greek is pronounced *akedia*,<sup>2</sup> a word that means "I don't care."

When everything is over and the bombs have gone off, and the water has come over the shoreline, and the streets have been rolled up, when all the switches have been thrown, (and here's the one that gets

me) when everything we have been doing is tallied up, the Creator and Judge will call the world to account with just one question which will be the last word before the verdict is rendered. “How did you respond to human need?”

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<sup>1</sup> I am quoting liberally, sometimes paraphrasing, from the closing paragraphs of Fred Craddock’s sermon “When He Shall Come.” Fred B. Craddock: The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> Translated more popularly as “sloth.”