

THE STORY OF 3 KINGS pt. 1- MATT. 2:1-18

CHRISTMAS, 2006

The king was almost beside himself in paranoia and jealousy. He was near the end of his 37 year reign, and he knew it deep inside himself. He had a painful and incurable disease that he knew would eventually take his life. But he was so addicted to power that he couldn't bring himself to retreat gracefully. He had been born to royal potential. His father and grandfather were also rulers. So from his earliest days he had tasted of the addictive sweetness of power. When he had finally gotten his chance, he had grabbed the throne with gusto. With clever cunning and finesse, he had made all of the right moves to solidify his position. He tricked the group who had assassinated his father to a dinner party where he had carefully planted hitmen as the greeters. When he heard that a small band of revolutionaries was forming, he got the name of the leader, had him arrested immediately, and without concrete charges had him tortured and killed slowly in the public square. His intimidation struck fear into the hearts of any others who would oppose him. He married 10 different wives to secure political advantages, putting several of them to death with their usefulness had passed.

Oh, don't get me wrong. Not everything this king did was harsh or painful. He did what would be considered some good things - but he always seemed to do them for personal or political advantage to gain more power. For instance, the food and clothing distribution that he engineered during the famine was carefully planned so that he would get the credit and secure the gratitude of the people. The port that he built to increase trade he named after the Roman Emperor so that he

would consolidate more power. He even renovated a religious temple so that the influential religious leaders would owe him. And these many clever moves had given him a long and seemingly illustrious reign - and what he wanted the most, power.

But now, as his health was failing and his rule was obviously coming to an end, he could feel the power slipping from his fingers, and he didn't like that feeling at all. So, as he was laying on his death-bed in an advanced state of paranoia, the king gives 2 final orders. First, he orders his own son who was the heir to the throne to be killed, fearing that his own flesh and blood might plot to take his own life a day or week or month before his time. And then he makes a list of noblemen whom he orders to be put to death after he finally passes. You see, this king is so insecure in his position that he suspects that his country will celebrate when he dies. So he wants to make sure that there is mourning, and he feels that he has insured that with his order to kill these noblemen who are loved by the people. Little does he know that his last order will be ignored when he finally passes, when his subjects are finally free from the power of his tyranny. And, as he suspected, after his death, the parties begin. Celebrations such as never had been experienced in his lifetime. For Herod was finally gone - and the nation of Israel could breathe easier having been delivered from the tyranny of his power.

I have just summarized the last days of a King who called himself Herod the Great. He was the ruling power when the Son of God came to this earth in that Bethlehem stable. But he is mainly remembered today as an example of a man who was addicted to power. For King Herod lusted after power and would do

anything to get it and keep it.

POWER- Standing by itself, out of any other context, people respond to the word in different ways, don't they? Some are tempted to recoil, fearing the dangers of power. Others are attracted to it like a magnet, desiring its energy and control. But like so many forces in life, power can be both a great blessing or a great curse. Power, correctly used, brings stability and order to our lives. Power, incorrectly used, brings heartache and grief to each of us.

We have planned to spend these 3 Sunday mornings before Christmas focusing on the Christmas Story found in Matthew 2. 2 of the 4 gospels give accounts of the birth of Christ. Matthew, presenting Christ as the King of the Jews, tells the story from a royal viewpoint. His lineage of Joseph, the adopted father, demonstrates Christ's right to rule as Messiah in the royal line of David. Luke, presenting Jesus as the perfect man, tells the story from a human viewpoint. His lineage of Mary the mother of Jesus demonstrates Jesus to be of the physical line of David as well. Mark and John do not include any accounts of Jesus Christ's birth at all. For Mark was written to present Christ as the perfect servant - nobody cared about the lineage or birth of a servant. And John was written to present Christ as the Son of God - God, being eternal, doesn't have a birth or lineage.

As we begin to look at Matthew 2, we could entitle this chapter the story of 3 kings:

*One king thought that he was in power and looked the part. If you were to enter his royal palace, you would have been very impressed. Golden shields

adorned the walls. Vestiges of power were all around.

*Some other kings were anxious to meet the king who was really in power. But it is interesting that they walked right past this first king and went to another source - a very unlikely source.

*A third king was the one who was really in power, but you never would have known it by looking at him. Nobody around him in his neighborhood even imagined that he was the one who really was in power.

*The king who thought that he was in power was so intoxicated by control that he would use any resource that he had to maintain his power over others.

*The other kings were so desirous of the truth that they were willing to sacrifice most of the resources that they had in their search for it.

*The third king who was the one really in power, was willing to give up all of his resources so that he could share his power with others.

*The first king was called Herod the Great

*The second group of kings were called the Magi. And while they were not kings in the literal sense of the term as we will see next week, the Lord willing, they were part of the ruling class of the Persian Empire so we could loosely refer to them as kings.

*The third king was the Baby in the Manger who was named Jesus.

This morning we will look at Herod the Great, the King who thought that he was in power and the one who would sacrifice all of his resources if necessary to protect that power. It is obvious from any study of Herod's life that he was a man who was obsessed with power. And we certainly find that illustrated in the

Biblical account found in Matthew 2. And it is clear both from a study of Herod's life in general, and also from the Biblical text that we have, that Herod's addiction to power was very destructive in his life. Now we want to ask a very simple question this morning, and then give 3 answers to that question which are found in Matthew 2.

HOW DID HEROD'S OBSESSION WITH POWER RUIN HIS LIFE? This is an important question for us to ask. For the temptation to use power selfishly was not just a temptation that Herod faced. Oh yes, he might have had more opportunity to have power than we have being born into royalty. But every one of us also faces the temptation to use power selfishly. For we all have a measure of power that has been granted to us by God himself, the author of all power. Now we are to be good stewards of all that God has given to us - and that includes the utilization of power. And the simple fact is that many, many people are ruining their lives and the lives of others because they have become addicted to gaining power. So we need to look at this king who was obsessed with power and see the destruction that it caused in his life.

1. First of all, I want you to see with me the personal emotional anxiety that Herod's addiction to power caused him. **IT CAUSED HIM GREAT ANXIETY FOR ANY PERCEIVED THREAT TO HIS POWER DISRUPTED HIS EMOTIONAL STATE.**

There are 2 examples given in the 2nd chapter of Matthew - and innumerable others could be given from a study of his personal life. The first time we begin to see Herod's emotional stress is when the Magi first come to him asking him the

whereabouts of the newborn King of the Jews. We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him. What was Herod's initial response? The Bible simply says in verse 3, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed". Why was he disturbed? Because he considered himself to be king of the Jews. He was the ruler over Israel at this time. So when he heard that someone else had been born to be king of the Jews, he immediately felt threatened.

Now looking at this request of the Magi rationally, Herod had no reason to be threatened. In fact, it should have been a great comfort to him. After all, Herod had ruled for about 33 years now. He began his reign in 37 B.C. So if a new king was just being born now, obviously that king wouldn't be able to rule for another 20 years or so. Herod could have taken this as a sign that he was going to reign for another 20 years. In reality, Herod would only rule for another 4 years. His entire reign was 37 years. But instead of being comforted by the birth of a new king implying many more years of his own reign, Herod was immediately threatened and insecure.

The second example of Herod's emotional distress is seen in verse 16 when he finds out that he has been tricked by the Magi. You remember the story how that an angel of God came in a dream to the Magi warning them not to tell Herod of the baby's whereabouts but to return back home another way. Verse 16 records Herod's reaction when he found out that the Magi had not bought his facade of wanting to worship this new king personally. "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious".

These 2 responses - anxiety and anger - are responses that someone who has

become addicted to power has when he or she feels that power threatened. And it good for us to realize this fact. For when we have an anxiety attack or feel a surge of anger, we need to ask ourselves the question - am I feeling this way because I feel my power threatened? Now, not all feelings of anxiety or anger come from perceived threat to power. But when someone who is obsessed with power feels that perceived control being threatened, he or she will feel anxious and angry about it.

How different were the responses of the Magi to Herod upon realizing that the King of the Jews had been born. The Magi didn't feel threatened by this event. The Magi were filled with joy and gladness. They could celebrate this wonderful blessing to the world. But Herod was distressed and angry when he learned of the news. And the difference, very simply, is that the Magi recognized where the true source of power was, and they were journeying to worship and recognize that power. Herod, on the other hand, was under the delusion that he was in control. So he resented any threats to his power and flew into an irrational rage when he sensed any presence of those threats.

2. But I would direct your attention to a second way in which an obsession with power ruined Herod's life. **IT CORRUPTED HIS CHARACTER LEADING HIM INTO A LIFE OF DECEIT.**

The Magi came to Herod with their request to be directed towards the birthplace of this one who had just been born king of the Jews. It was natural for them to do so for it could be assumed that if anyone would know the birthplace of royalty, it would be the King himself. In fact, it is likely that the Magi were

assuming that the new prince would have been born in Herod's own royal palace. The fact that the Magi were given immediate audience before Herod is testimony to their influential position. Herod meeting with the Magi was a consultation of earthly royalty.

But isn't it amazing the response that Herod has as soon as he suspects that his power is being threatened. Herod is eager to invite the Magi in for consultation for that contributes to his ego. Of course, such influential people of royalty should desire to speak with the king, Herod the Great. But as soon as Herod discovers that they are really not interested in seeing him, but are really interested in searching out this new king, Herod almost instinctively resorts to deceit. He begins to lie. Notice what he says in verses 7, 8. "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'"

Now it is obvious that Herod had no plan to actually worship the newborn king of the Jews. Herod wanted to kill him. But Herod lied and said that he wanted to worship him. Why would Herod tell such a bold-faced lie to very influential people? Remember he wasn't trying to deceive just your average citizen here, he was lying to a Persian ruling class. Herod felt his power-base to be threatened, so he immediately resorted to anything to protect it. Maintaining power was more important than his integrity, maintaining power was more important than his reputation, maintaining power was more important than his own honesty.

One of the dangers of power addiction is the priority that it immediately takes in our lives. When a desire for power ascends to the throne, it will tolerate no other rivals. So businessmen will cheat in order to maintain their power, politicians will lie in order to maintain their power, family members will manipulate in order to maintain power. Personal integrity becomes secondary. Protecting power is always primary. And our character can so quickly become corrupted.

3. But I want you to see with me a 3rd casualty of Herod's obsession with power. IT CAUSED PAIN TO OTHERS AROUND HIM AND HINDERED HIM FROM HAVING CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS.

When Herod first heard the request of the Magi, verse 3 says that "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." It wasn't just King Herod who was emotionally distraught, but his personal anxiety spread to the palace and even to the whole capital city.

And, of course, the greatest pain of Herod's obsession with power came to those mothers around Bethlehem who lost children just because Herod was afraid of losing power. Herod not only became a liar, but he also became a murderer because he was so obsessed with power in his life. Just think of how many people suffered just because Herod was insecure about his power.

And today that pattern continues. Many people are suffering today because of those who are obsessed with power. Just look at the chaos and destruction that the citizens of Iraq are living through today. Millions of innocent people who just want to live normal lives and raise their families surrounded by confused terror,

thousands of dedicated soldiers waking up every morning wondering if today will be their last, an entire country driven to the brink of civil war all because a modern day Herod named Saddam Hussein and other extreme religious zealots are addicted to power. And I wish that I could say that the obsession with power was just a pagan temptation, but I can't, for we all know that there are many professing Christians who are enamored with having more power and are leaving bodies of wounded and hurting people strewn in their wake.

As we conclude our look at King Herod this morning, I would just mention 3 truths that we must all remember with regards to this intoxicating temptation towards power. For, let's not kid ourselves. We all are tempted with the lure of power. The serpent's basic temptation to Eve was the temptation for personal power. "You don't want to live your life serving God, do you? Eat of this fruit and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." If you eat of this fruit, you will have greater power. You will have intellectual power, knowing good and evil. You will have personal control, being like God. And just as Eve fell for that temptation, so we each wrestle with the lure of power in our lives. We have to realize that an obsession with power will tear us apart internally, will corrupt our character and will hurt people around us.

How do we resist this temptation that Satan has used so effectively down through the centuries?

WE MUST REMEMBER 3 THINGS:

***WE DON'T HAVE ANY POWER PERSONALLY. ALL POWER IS FROM GOD.** Now it is true that God gives to each of us a measure of personal

control and power. We each have the ability to make choices and we are responsible for the choices that we make in life. And God often gives to us some authority to fulfill his calling in our lives. Government officials and business executives have a measure of power. But ultimately, none of us has any power that hasn't been given to us by God. Do you remember that interesting conversation that Jesus had with Pontius Pilate during his trial? Pilate was becoming frustrated with Jesus because he wouldn't answer the obviously shallow accusations against him. So Pilate said to Jesus as recorded in John 19:10, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Verse 11 says simply, "Jesus answered, 'You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.'" The next verse is even more interesting to me. Verse 12 says, "From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jews kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.'" You see, Pilate was caught in a power struggle. On the one hand, he recognized the truth of what Jesus was saying. But on the other hand, he was trying to protect his power-base with Caesar. But Christ's words struck truth to his heart. Pilate was deluded if he thought that he had real power. The only power he had was that which had been given to him by God.

If that was true of Pilate, it is also true of each of us here this morning. We have no inherent power of our own. Any power we have has been given by God. We are all frail creatures of dust. We are dependent upon God for every breathe that we breathe, for every beat of our hearts. Therefore, it is foolish for us to

become obsessed with power as if it were something that we actually possess.

***GOD IS MORE CONCERNED FOR OUR CHARACTER THAN FOR OUR AMBITIONS.** What the Bible says to us is most important. What the Bible does not say to us is also interesting. Do you know that the Bible never commands us to covet positions of power. God is not impressed with our promotions. God does not think more highly of us as we climb the ladder of worldly success. Now that doesn't mean that we shouldn't use our God-given abilities to their highest potentials. But God isn't impressed with our position in life. God, on the other hand, is very concerned for our character. The fruit of the Spirit all speak to character. Honesty, integrity, discipline, concern for others, these are the concerns of God for our lives. If we ever come to the place where our personal character is being eroded by our ambitions, we know that we have drifted outside the will of God and God is not pleased with us.

***WE FIND OURSELVES AND OUR PURPOSE FOR BEING ONLY AS WE RECOGNIZE GOD AS THE SOURCE OF ALL POWER AND SUBMIT OURSELVES TO HIM.**

Herod as an individual was a personified oxymoron. He was incredibly rich in all that the world considered to be valuable, but he was totally bankrupt in his personal character. Addicted to the pursuit of power, he died all alone a miserable wretch. Contrast Herod with the Magi who we will consider more fully next week, the Lord willing. They were willing to make an unbelievable sacrifice in what the world considers to be most valuable, but in doing so they found ultimate purpose in life which brought great joy to their souls, and they played an integral

role in God's redemptive program.

We often see the slogan during this time of year: Wise Men still seek Him. But sadly, there appear to be many more in this world who are seeking power more than Christ. What or who are you seeking this morning?