

Week 15
December 28, 2008

The King of the Hill
The Kingdom of God in the Christmas Story
Matthew 2:1-18

Let's cut to the chase – the chase for the child king. Why is King Herod so disturbed by the visit of the Magi? Why is he so threatened by the prophecies about Bethlehem? Why is he so adamant about catching and killing the baby born under the sacred star? What's wrong with King Herod? And what's so frightening about a little baby?

The answer to these questions is familiar to us all. While Herod has a tragic and hyper-extended case of a common ailment, his problem is our problem. Herod loves power. Just as we love power, so does Herod. The baby is a threat to his power. In a sense, Jesus is a threat to ours, as well.

The lunacy of Herod's frantic pursuits is stark. The long history of Israel is a story of foreign invasions and occupations, followed by the briefest spans of independence and autonomy. You'd think that Herod would welcome a deliverer; a messiah figure who could lead the people to real freedom. If he really was the people's king (which he wasn't), he would have cheered the arrival of the Son of David, child of Bethlehem, for whom even the stars in heaven aligned. But like King Saul in the Old Testament, who ended up being jealous and threatened by David – to the point where Saul went crazy trying to pursue and kill David – so Herod could not endure the thought of a stronger, better king disrupting his rule.

We can imagine that Herod was comfortable with things as they were. After all, he's literally scraped the top of a mountain to build his own palace overlooking Jerusalem, in part because of the wealth created by his marriage with the Roman Empire. And Rome's willingness to keep peace and police the land might be an agreeable alternative to real responsibility. Perhaps Herod loves status without responsibility and privilege without the burden of actual governance.

This baby could really foul things up! First, he might incite the people to rebel against him. Or he might ask Herod to be good or great and to awaken slumbering embers of justice and righteousness. Or the baby could grow up and lead the people to break with Rome, disrupt international relations and shut down the flow of modernization – and money!

Maybe worst of all, this potential usurper could infringe on Herod's plan to do whatever in the world he wants to. History calls this Herod, among other Herod's, "Herod the Great." Nobody messes with Herod the Great!

Again, Herod's power-mongering is an amplified version, but not isolated. This is the basic human weakness – a hunger for power. It teased Adam and Eve into eating forbidden fruit, and it drives the greater number of wars and conflicts – even familial conflicts – in the world today. We don't want to be told what to do, and we like to control our own destinies with as little interference as possible.

Now let's offer a balancing statement. So much of this – our interest in independence and self-determination – is good. If it weren't, then why do I see it in my three-year-old son? And you *know* he does no wrong! Honestly, I support him when he says, "Daddy, *by myself!*" as he unpeels an orange or climbs a ladder or struggles to put on his shoes. The individualization of a child, and then a teen, and even of an adult who wants to be responsible and not burden others – it's all part of our development. So much of this must be good, to the point where God honors our individuality and dignity and self-determination even in matters as important as our eternal destiny.

But there's a tipping point, and it presents its allure early and often in our lives. That healthy dignity and self-determination tips over into power-mongering whenever we want to gain at the expense of others' losses; or advance at the cost of others' diminishment; or prosper in a way that brings poverty on others; or cocoon in a way that shuns the accountability of others; or privatize in a way that avoids responsibility and generosity toward others. In other words, we are created and then recreated in Christ to live in community. Whenever our gains facilitate the gains of others, they are real gains. When they don't, we are literally feathering our own pillows.

While this is apparently somewhat natural – to protect and promote myself and my interest – it is not the better part of my nature. Perhaps the striving and hunkering down and self-promotion and protection have their places in certain seasons or circumstances. But in the big picture of life, Jesus is teaching us, on God's behalf, a better way.

Love God, first of all. Jesus teaches us to adore the Father, seek the Father, rely on the Father and even to live life only at his bidding. While that level of submission might sound powerless – even weak – I've never heard anyone describe Jesus that way. He indicates that by loving God and building that vertical connection, we are actually able to do what he did and more. Real power according to every good definition.

After loving God, Jesus tells us to love our neighbor. This means loving the person near us according to his or her need. So we love our families and our actual neighbors, our fellow humans. Jesus teaches us to be other-minded and servant-hearted. He shows us how he came to serve rather than be served, and then he tells us to live accordingly. He takes human notions of power and turns them upside-down, and seems to suggest that the strongest people are the least interested in promoting themselves. The most powerful people are those who are unaffected by all of life's interferences in their determination to build community, better the world and lift up those who need real help.

Yes, Jesus also teaches us to love ourselves. He modeled healthy self-care by prayer and solitude. Jesus did not teach self-deprecating or self-punishing faith. He seems most interested in seeing us discover who we actually are in order to be more completely ourselves. He wants us to live confidently, peacefully and with real traction in the application of our talents. Jesus teaches us to lose ourselves and find ourselves – to let go of the need to live for our own gratifications and to discover that there is nothing more truly gratifying than living for God by living for others.

This is so different than scraping off the top of our own private hills and building palaces for our own comfort, glory and whim.

I remember the grade school game called "King of the Hill." It happened in vacant fields and playgrounds, wherever we could test our mettle and prove our superiority and ingenuity. The winner was always the bully or the trickster. Sometimes I was one or the other. As normal and developmental as it might have been to hone my strength and

shrewdness, my better moments came when I summoned my peers into games and activities that allowed for more winners and more actual development.

In the same way, we'll truly succeed more whenever we learn how to create win-wins and opportunities for the weak to enjoy the view from the top of the hill.

Herod tried to keep Jesus down and cling to his palace on the hill. He didn't and we can't. Jesus' way is the best way and Jesus is the true king.