

THE INAUGURATION

*a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, January 8, 2017
based on Matthew 2:1-12*

The story of the wise men is so familiar to us it seems just another pleasant piece of the Christmas season, far removed from the news of our day, so dominated as it is by political turmoil and conflicts between peoples. We imagine the wise men kneeling before the infant Jesus, and it appears to be such a nice scene. We easily miss how brazen and politically charged the wise men's action was.

The wise men were called *magoi* in ancient Greek, or the "magi" as we transliterate it. They were philosopher-priests from the area of Persia. They studied the stars; and they saw something in the stars which led them to conclude that a king of extraordinary significance was being born in the land of Judea. They traveled to Judea, and came to the palace.

There they asked, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him." It seems such a pleasant, innocent question. But in the context of King Herod's court, it was anything but. There was a king of the Jews, and it was Herod. The claim that there was someone else who was king of the Jews was a threat to Herod's rule. Herod responded with violence, as he sent troops to slaughter the infants of Bethlehem.

The story of the wise men would be replicated, in a way, in the story of the early church. Of all the titles that early Christians used for Jesus, there was one that they used more than any other—the title, Lord—*kyrios* in Greek, *dominus* in Latin. But there was already someone else who claimed the title of Lord—Caesar. You can find the word *dominus*, along with the name of Caesar, on a number of Roman coins. When Christians said that Jesus was Lord, it was a direct challenge to the emperor; because Christians were saying that there is a higher authority to which Christians owed a higher allegiance. Emperors responded with brutal persecution.

The political challenge brought by the wise men and later by the early Christians was all the more galling to the ruling powers because the challenge was brought by people who had no real status to begin with. The wise men came from beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire—they were foreigners—who were in no position to suggest who ought to be king in the Roman province of Judea. Early Christians were mostly people who did not hold the status of Roman citizenship. Rulers hate to be challenged by underlings. But the New Testament proclaims that we are given a status by God—we are citizens of God's Kingdom, and we are now under the ultimate rule of Christ, who is truly king.

So the apostle Paul would say, "God has seated Christ at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." (Ephesians 1:20–21) "So our citizenship is in heaven, to which we look for a Savior, the Lord, Jesus Christ." (Philippians 3:20) It is this truth that is being declared, for the first time in the gospels, in the story of the wise men. Their visit to the holy family was a kind of inauguration. As they knelt in worship before the infant Jesus, they declared that Jesus is the true king, who reigns over all peoples. It is Jesus who has ultimate authority and to whom we owe our utmost allegiance.

This truth has guided Christians ever since. We may have all sorts of rulers; but the Biblical message is that every ruler stands underneath a higher moral authority. So rather than burning incense to the emperor as a sign of worshipful obeisance, as people did in the first and second centuries, we hold our rulers accountable and critique them in light of higher moral values; and if rulers get out of line, we get rid of the rulers, as during the American Revolution, when one of the slogans was “No king but King Jesus.”

All this puts the current events of our day into important context. Our country will be having an inauguration in less than two weeks, and a new president will be accompanied by a new Congress. No matter what side of the aisle that you’re on, the New Testament gives valuable guidance for how we are to respond to today’s rulers. In general as Christians, we follow Paul’s dictum in Romans 13, where he said, “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1). We support the government and obey the laws, since government carries out the good function of creating order and restraining evildoers. At the same time, we join with the wise men in recognizing where ultimate authority lies.

This past Christmas day, the Republican National Committee, led by Reince Priebus, put out a statement that read in part as follows: “Over two millennia ago, a new hope was born into the world, a Savior who would offer the promise of salvation to all mankind. Just as the three wise men did on that night, this Christmas heralds a time to celebrate the good news of a new King.” There was a lot of controversy following that statement as to whether “the new King” was a reference to Donald Trump, or whether, as Priebus insisted, it was simply a reference to Jesus. However it was intended, the statement generated a lot of confusion; and certainly a central issue of our time is that many people do get confused about where they really should be looking for truth, for values, for direction, and for hope. But if we genuinely stand with the wise men, we are not confused about who is King. Our eyes are upon Jesus.

This means that even as we live as law-abiding citizens, we will maintain a critical distance with respect to our government. We will measure whatever the government does against the values of Jesus. It also means that we are clear about where our hope lies. For all the good that government might do, it cannot save us. We look to a higher power for ultimate direction in life.

And this, finally, is how we can have genuine hope. These past months in America have been characterized by a lot of despair over what might come out of Washington -- no matter who won the election! But when we stand with the wise men, we have hope, because we recognize who is truly on the throne of the universe. So we acclaim Christ as our king. We rejoice that Christ is One who draws all people together under his reign. With the wise men we devote our gifts to his service. And no matter what may come in life, as we trust in Christ, we can live in faith, in love, and in real confidence for the future.

The apostle Paul said it well in the closing words of his letter to Timothy: “As for you, people of God: pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called; keep God’s commandments . . . until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ—He who is the only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.” (I Tim. 6:11–15)