

*Matthew 2: 1-12*

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."*

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

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What's Possible?

The Gospel writer Matthew wanted people to choose: who was the real king?<sup>1</sup> Where was their allegiance? Who had power in their lives?

Matthew saw two choices: The first, and most logical, was King Herod and his sons; Herod was widely known as "King of the Jews;" it was the title the Roman Empire had given him in 40 BCE. Herod is the one in power when the Gospel of Matthew opens, strong in his palace, empowered by the Romans.

The second, alternative choice was Jesus, also known as the King of the Jews, a title *Matthew* gives him. Jesus, the Messiah, according to Matthew. The one foretold in our reading from Isaiah.

Herod and Jesus therefore are rival kings. When Matthew has the Wise Men stop by Herod's palace and inquire where they could find "the King of the Jews" - the baby Jesus - those are "fighting words" to Herod. Treasonous. A huge threat.<sup>2</sup>

Who do you choose, Matthew asks his Jewish readers, to be King of the Jews: King Herod or Jesus?

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For all of us this Advent, it's a good question. Who or what has power in our lives? To whom do we pledge allegiance, not with our words, but with our actions?

Day by day, are you drawn most to that which maximizes your money or status? Do you give power in your life to other peoples' opinions of you? Do you spend energy mulling over how to get even with someone, or how to maneuver you and your allies into a place of greater prominence? Or are you driven by a hope to serve, a commitment to honor everyone, a desire to first understand others' pain?

In Advent, we get to ask this question: what has power in our lives - what Matthew would call kingly power? And how did that get power? Did you knowingly choose it?

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Nelson Mandela died three days ago. He was the first to say he was no saint, that there were times he acted autocratically, he'd hurt some of those closest to him.

But we know that Nelson Mandela, as he aged, was a man who intentionally chose his path - against great odds, he did not cede power to either his brutal oppressors in South Africa or to his fiery fellow freedom fighters.

What had power in Nelson Mandela's life was his commitment to freedom for his people, and dignity for all races. That guided everything.

Because of this moral focus, he was able to forgive vicious enemies, grant dignity to those who had abused him, and craft a non-violent transition of power in South Africa that none could have imagined.

Prison time refined Nelson Mandela, he said, giving him time to evaluate himself, his actions, his motivations. He came to believe that "to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."<sup>3</sup>

Another man convicted with Mandela said that "A prisoner at Robben Island [prison] could look through his cell window and choose to see either bars or stars."<sup>4</sup> Mandela chose to see stars.

Mandela kept his eyes on the stars, following them, like the Wise Men did. Wise men and women – of our day or of old – see the stars and follow those, not the bars which block our sights, which limit us, which imprison us.

“Hating,” said Mandela, “clouds the mind. It gets in the way of strategy. Leaders cannot afford to hate.”<sup>5</sup>

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In Matthew's gospel, King Herod sees only bars, sees only a rival when the sages from the East come inquiring, “Where is the one who is to be born King of the Jews?” Herod is determined to destroy his enemy, so the King deceitfully asks the Wise Men to return once they have found the baby Jesus, and let Herod know just where he is, so Herod can also pay Jesus homage.

We know the lie; in the next chapter of Matthew, Herod savagely slays all the little boys under the age of two who were born in Bethlehem, determined to murder any possible rival.

Mandela invited his jailers to his inauguration, and had them sit in the front row.<sup>6</sup>

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I wonder, what's really possible in our lives? Is Mandela a once-in-a-century figure? Is he inspiring, but someone we mortals cannot emulate: impossible to follow, unreal for the rest of us?

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Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are the two modern-day theologians whose book I'm preaching on during Advent: The First Christmas. They raise just this question - how do any of us determine what's real and what's possible? What's real? What's possible?<sup>7</sup>

They ask that question because they are grappling with two differing birth stories about Jesus. In the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – only Matthew and Luke talk about Jesus as a baby; the others begin the story when he's a man. And then of the two who do write about Jesus' birth at Christmas, the Luke story I preached about last week, is quite different from the Matthew story.

Remember: in Luke last week, we heard about Mary and Joseph travelling from Nazareth where they lived, south to Bethlehem. We heard of angels who sang to shepherds about the birth. The theme in Luke was peace – Peace on earth, good will to men!

But in Matthew there are no shepherds, only wise men. And there is no travel to Bethlehem – Mary and Joseph already live there. Moreover, if we read Matthew carefully, we notice Wise Men, but no Three Kings – there are three gifts given to Jesus, but we have no idea how many Wise Men came from the East, following a star.<sup>8</sup>

Why would the stories be so different? Because they conflict, are they wrong?

Borg and Crossen ask us to pause, and consider, How do we *ever* know what is real and what is possible?

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This is worth a book group, but here's a slice of what Professors Borg and Crossen say.<sup>9</sup> Since the Enlightenment, and scientific inquiry, we usually say that truth equals factuality; truth is verifiable; we can test it. If something is not factual, then it is not true. Therefore, we say, a story is true only if it is factual. What are the real *facts*, we want to know.

Of course, this assumes that reality can be measured fully in our space-time universe of matter and energy, operating in accordance with the natural law of cause and effect. It does not allow for a non-material reality, a spiritual reality.

Nonetheless, our Enlightenment view of truth equated with factuality makes most of us highly skeptical of so-called "spectacular events," such as supernatural interventions; virgin births; special stars that appear; and angelic visitations. Here at King's Chapel, most of us share this skepticism.

Some Christians respond to these Enlightenment critiques by insisting that the birth stories of Jesus *are* factual – they literally took place just as described in the Bible. To doubt the story becomes tantamount to doubting the power of God, who can do anything; being skeptical equates to lacking faith.

Second, if Christians believe that the virgin birth is essential to the divinity of Jesus, the factuality of the Biblical birth narratives is even more vital; to this mindset, if Jesus were born of a human father rather than God, he is not special, and Jesus' very divinity is at stake. Third, for those Christians who believe in the doctrine of original sin, that says sin is passed on from generation to generation through sex, then Jesus could not be conceived through human sex, because he would be tainted by sin.

BUT another group of Christians – including many of us here – have a different view. This view is that even if the birth stories are not *factual*, they still can be *true*, in the deepest sense, a profound parable. Just as Jesus told parables to help us understand *God* better, Matthew and Luke are telling us a parable, so we can understand *Jesus* better.

But parables do not depend on factuality. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?" and teaching that whoever stops to help a beaten man on the side of the road acts like the neighbor, even if he is a despised Samaritan, a hated foreigner from far away, and not a pious Jewish leader from nearby.

Parables are powerful, because they undermine the taken-for-granted way of seeing things: that Samaritans are all worthless; that loving our neighbor means just loving the people exactly like us, next door.

The truth of the Good Samaritan parable does not depend on it being a factually accurate story that really took place. Its truth does not depend on an actual traveller going down from Jerusalem to Jericho one day, on actual robbers beating him up, an actual priest and Levite who passed by, and an actual Samaritan who stopped to help. The parable is true anyway, even if the teller of the parable made up the story.

So in Matthew, say Borg and Crossen, the "parable" of Jesus' birth posits an outlandish thought: that Herod is not the real King of the Jews, but Jesus is. And to make his case, Matthew casts Herod not as the one to whom the people owe their allegiance as King, but rather as Pharaoh, the ancient evil king of Egypt from Israel's past, from whom God helped them to escape, in the Exodus. Matthew then depicts Jesus as the new Moses, who will lead his people away from Pharaoh.

Later in the book of Matthew, just as Moses received the ten commandments, or laws on a mountain -- Mt. Sinai -- Jesus will give new laws in his Sermon on the Mount. (In Luke it is a sermon on the plain). And to set the stage for the giving of law the mount, Matthew tells a birth story where Herod tries to kill the baby Jesus, just as the ancient Pharaoh tried to kill all the little Hebrew boys. Baby Moses, like baby Jesus, escapes: Moses hidden by his mother in a basket in the bulrushes. Jesus -- the new Moses -- escapes an evil king, too. <sup>10</sup>

Matthew has a tall order to fill, in order to convince those hearing his Gospel that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed, the true King of the Jews. The predominant expectation of Jesus' time is that the Messiah will be a warrior King, who will liberate the Jews from their oppressors by force, another warrior King like their ancient King David. Could a man like Jesus who preached non-violence, who asked us to love our enemies, really be the One to liberate them, to change the world?

Matthew says yes, a position similar to the outlandish proposal that Luke offered us last week. Luke argued that the Savior of the World and Bringer of Peace was Jesus, with his non-violent tactics and commitment to justice. It was not Caesar Augustus, also called Savior and bringer of the peace because he'd authored Pax Romana; he'd instilled peace throughout the Roman Empire, by violence and domination.

This week Matthew asks, Who is the real King of the Jews, worthy to follow: violent Herod or non-violent Jesus? Last week Luke asked, Who is the real Savior of the

world, the bringer of Peace: Jesus preaching peace through justice and non-violence, or Caesar, enforcing peace through domination?

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What is really true? What is possible? We get to choose how we see the world, how we see ourselves, how we see our fellow humans. What holds most sway over us?

In South Africa, what was really true was that a small and vicious minority – out of fear or greed or both – brutally repressed the native people. That is really true.

What was possible? Could a non-violent transition of power, from the few to the many, based on justice for all, ever take place? That was *not* possible, nearly everyone thought.

And Nelson Mandela responded: "It always seems impossible until it's done."<sup>11</sup>

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Professors Borg and Crossan, after years of study, conclude that likely only these narrow elements from the two birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are factually true: that Jesus was an actual historical figure, that he was born to parents named Mary and Joseph, and that they lived in Nazareth in Galilee.

For Borg and Crossan, it's immaterial whether there really were shepherds or wise men present at the birth, whether Jesus was really born in Bethlehem in a stable, and even whether there was a virgin birth.

The deeper truth, they would argue, is that Jesus was – and is – a powerful rival of all the Herod-like and Caesar-like powers still in our world today, that insist on maintaining power through violence and domination, rather than through non-violence and justice.<sup>12</sup>

The deeper truth, they would say, is that in Jesus we saw a decisive disclosure of God, what can be seen of God acting in a human life, revealing God's dream for this world, enacted through us humans.<sup>13</sup>

What we saw in Jesus was the power of forgiveness and peace, the deepest, most compelling truth, for those who will listen.

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The power of forgiveness and peace? Really?

Then we saw it, too, in our own lifetimes in South Africa: non-violence and forgiveness that changed a corner of the world where humans had done the

unspeakable to one another in the name of apartheid. In the very place where the efficacy of non-violence and forgiveness were most ludicrous, it succeeded!

Longfellow said, "the lives of all great men remind us that we can make our lives sublime." <sup>14</sup>

"The day that [Mandela] was released from prison" said President Obama, "gave me a sense of what human beings can do when they're guided by their hopes and not by their fears."

That is a FACT, that we all witnessed. A 30 year old South African woman, visiting Boston this week told WBUR: "[Mandela] was a symbol of humanity and forgiveness. Because he forgave, I never had to hate." <sup>15</sup>

Why do *you* ever have to hate?

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Dear friends, Who or what will be king of your heart? Herod or Jesus? Treating others as rivals to be bested, rather than worthy of profound dignity? Holding resentments, rather than forgiving? Seeing bars rather than the stars?

It's Advent, and here at King's Chapel we get to consider all this again, pondering it in our hearts, not only for global politics, but for life within our church, and our own lives. We get to follow the star again to a manger where a king of love is being born.

Let's travel the journey, the exploration, together, that we also might grow and change. It's so possible!

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth (Harper One, 2007), at 37. Throughout my Advent sermon series, I rely heavily upon this book.

<sup>2</sup> Id. at 137

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/367338.Nelson\\_Mandela](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/367338.Nelson_Mandela)

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Kathrada, quoted by Scott Simon, NPR, "As We Memorialize Mandela, Remember Those Who Stood With Him."

<http://www.npr.org/2013/12/07/249354689/as-we-memorialize-mandela-remember-those-who-stood-with-him>

<sup>5</sup> Bill Keller, "Nelson Mandela, South Africa's Liberator as Prisoner and President, Dies at 95" (New York Times, December 5, 2013).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/06/world/africa/nelson-mandela-obit.html?r=0>

<sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>7</sup> Borg and Crossan, at 28.

<sup>8</sup> Id., at 22-23

<sup>9</sup> Id., at 26-36.

<sup>10</sup> Id., at 41-46

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/367338.Nelson Mandela](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/367338.Nelson_Mandela)

<sup>12</sup> Id. at 184

<sup>13</sup> Id. at 225

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Fitzgerald, "Mandela was the Moses of His Time," The Boston Herald (Dec. 5, 2013),

[http://bostonherald.com/news\\_opinion/columnists/joe\\_fitzgerald/2013/12/fitzgerald\\_nelson\\_mandela\\_was\\_the\\_moses\\_of\\_his\\_time](http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/columnists/joe_fitzgerald/2013/12/fitzgerald_nelson_mandela_was_the_moses_of_his_time)

<sup>15</sup> Daylene Van Buuren, Executive Year, City Year of South Africa, WBUR (Dec. 6, 2013) <http://www.wbur.org/2013/12/06/nelson-mandela-city-year>