

### The road is not straight

Recap of sermon from January 5, 2024

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the Epiphany is rich with mystery and intrigue. There is not much known about these “magi” who come first to Herod the Great and then visit the newborn messiah, but there is a layer to the story that I’ve never thought of before this year.

The magi are said to be “from the east,” and from this we can infer that they were priests from Persia (modern day Iran), which was a part of the Parthian Empire. Zoroastrianism was a common religion of the Parthians that was very tuned into the stars and reading signs. We often romanticize the magi—count them, name them, and place their painted figurines next to camels in our nativity sets.

Persia however, was not just some strange foreign land. It had a deep historical significance (especially to the writer of Matthew) and, now under the Parthian Empire, it was an important political symbol. The Parthian and Roman Empires were the two great superpowers of the time. Many historians point to a truce between Augustus and the Parthian Empire as the start of the Pax Romana.

While there was an unofficial cold war between the two empires that started around 50 BC and lasted until the 60’s AD, there were also a series of skirmishes—especially in the buffer zone. This included places like Armenia, Syria, and of course, Judea.

Herod the Great was a famously violent and paranoid king. It may have started when his own father—the one who installed him as King of Judea—was poisoned at a banquet by a man he thought was an ally. In reality, the man was a Judean rebel who thought the Parthians could overthrow Herod and install a more independent Jewish rule.

The idea of a King from Persia overthrowing an oppressive regime in Judea and allowing independent Jewish rule was not a fairy tale. It is exactly what happened 500 years previous, and this is detailed in our Book of Isaiah. King Cyrus the Great was a Persian ruler who conquered the Babylonians and ended the Jewish exile. He encouraged the Jews to return and rebuild their Temple. Cyrus the Great is named as a messiah in Isaiah. So when the Magi from the Parthian Empire, an enemy empire with a history of freeing the Jews, showed up in Herod’s court, asking for the new Messiah, we may understand Herod’s fear.

In the midst of political turmoil, powerful empires in a cold (sometimes hot) war, an oppressive system that pushed



*A map of the two great empires of the time of Jesus’ birth. There was a treaty signed in 1 A.D., but “The Buffer Zone” was still an area under constant dispute.*

the people to brink, rumors of a new Messiah caused an outbreak of fear and paranoia.

And who was hurt?

A small family in a small town, with a miraculous mother and a newborn who had been visited by shepherds was suddenly the target of a violent and powerful man.

The family fled to Egypt. Tradition holds that they traveled 2000 miles in three years, surviving because of the providence of God and the generosity and hospitality of strangers. Pawns in the midst of a global crisis, they became refugees.

This feels all too familiar today. We stand here feeling powerless in a world of political turmoil, with powerful empires in a cold (sometimes hot) war, an oppressive system pushing people to the brink, there is a rise of fear and paranoia. When the powerful scheme for power, natural resources are exploited, people are oppressed, and everyone suffers.

Many of us feel helpless in the midst of global politics and the machinations of the powerful. New powers claiming to be great take up the mantle of the Herod. In the meantime, people suffer. Families are threatened. Those seeking safety and stability are met with suspicion.

Our call on this Epiphany is to claim the true source of greatness. Our greatness does not come in conquering land, exploiting resources, or oppressing people as it did for Herod. Our greatness comes from welcoming a refugee family. It comes from caring for one another in times of struggle. It comes from feeding those in need.

Looking for a messiah, the magi triggered an outburst of fear and violence by Herod the Great, whose father was killed at a table by a cup of poison. We have found our messiah, triggering a conspiracy of love as we sit at Christ’s table as he shares a cup of forgiveness. It is table made greater by making it wider, adding more seats, and breaking more bread.