

THE IRON THRONE

Magical (Part 3) | Matthew 2:1-13

How many of you have ever heard of a television series called, HOUSE OF THE DRAGON? For those of you who've successfully missed it, House of the Dragon is the award-winning prequel to the HBO blockbuster series, GAME OF THRONES. As your self-appointed source on the intersection of popular culture and Christian theology, let me tell you that last week was a Big One. On December 4, a spell-binding trailer dropped for Season Two of House of the Dragon and guess what? The trailer tells us that people are still fighting over who gets to sit on the IRON THRONE.

In *Game of Thrones* lore, the Iron Throne is made from the swords of 1,000 vanquished warriors – people whom the great King Aegon the Conqueror had defeated in battle. The Iron Throne represents the supreme seat of power. The person who sits on that throne bows to no one. They have their will done. They are the center of the kingdom. It's interesting to note that back in 2014, Queen Elizabeth II of England was given an opportunity to sit in a life-sized replica of that throne and she wouldn't do it. Apparently, however, THIS guy had no problem! From time immemorial – and except for wise ones like Queen Elizabeth who really understand what such a seat means -- people have been fighting over who gets to sit on the throne.

When we open up the Bible today to Matthew chapter 2, we meet a King who is severely, the text says, **disturbed**. The New Revised Standard version of the scripture reads: **When King Herod heard [the Magi's report about the birth of Jesus], he was frightened. (Matt 2:3, NRSV)** Now, what could possibly be so frightening about the birth of a baby? Why would the central event of Christmas fill a man like Herod with fear? And, more personally, why might it disturb you and me? I've posed this question before, but it is so appropriate to this series we are in that I want to ask it again. ***What, if anything, might be scary about the Babe of Bethlehem?***

To get at a partial answer, let me refresh your memory about this man, Herod, and the first thing you need to know is that he was NOT WEAK or STUPID. In a day even more politically tumultuous than ours, Herod held the throne of Judea for nearly 40 years. Imagine any world leader (other than Queen Elizabeth) who keeps the throne for four decades. That's even longer than I've lived! But Herod did that. How?

The answer is by managing down and managing up. Through a skillful blend of popular public works projects... strategic assassinations... and ruthless military suppression, Herod kept the revolutionary tendencies of the Jewish people in check. He managed DOWN very effectively. Herod also had this savvy pattern of naming his building projects after whoever was in power in Rome or about to come to power and this made Herod a favorite to a succession of Roman Emperors. He managed UP very shrewdly. In fact, the Roman Senate was so impressed by Herod that they voted him the official title: "KING OF THE JEWS."

So what do you suppose Herod felt when a group of Magi (highly educated scholars from the East) arrived in Jerusalem and asked: **Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews (Mat 2:2)?** If the wise men were right, then the birth of this baby seriously threatened Herod's preferred seat in life. It meant that a day was coming when Herod would no longer be calling all the shots... when the resources of the kingdom would no longer be his to spend mainly on himself... when he would no longer have it in his power to say who would live or die... when he would have to give up the Iron Throne he had occupied for decades! No wonder Herod was disturbed.

Are you? On some level, I am, when I really think about the implications of Christmas. You see, I'm OK if Jesus is good with simply advising my current administration. He's welcome to give me some *suggestions*. It's always nice to have someone I can call in a pinch when I need more help. I can spare an hour or two for a spiritual consultant. But that's not what Christmas means at all. The birth of Jesus means that Someone has arrived Who belongs on the throne I currently occupy.

Christmas means that the rightful King has come and he wants to govern from my Big Chair. He wants to direct the use of my resources... He wants to guide the way I treat and talk to people... He regards every thought and sphere of my life as either a loyal possession of his or as a yet-to-be-recovered part of his dominion. Does that register with you too? If you are wise, then you realize that Christmas threatens our power and position – the Iron Throne we typically hold onto. Herod got that.

And MORE as well. No dummy, Herod understood that the birth of the Christ child challenges our pursuit of PRESTIGE. His meeting with the Magi made that clear to him. It was not a MAGICAL moment for Herod. I mean, just picture the scene. These visitors come shuffling into the throne room of Herod the Great. Historians tell us THAT was the title he preferred. I remember that when my father became a member of the Board of Regents of the State of New York, we asked him if we should call him "Regent." He said, "No. Call me, 'Your Excellency.'" Technically, that was the official title. But my Dad was clear about who REALLY sat on the throne, so he was just joking. Herod wasn't joking. He told people: Call me, "Herod the Great."

So these Magi show up. But instead of showering him with, "*O your Majesty,*" or "*O your Royal Magnificence,*" these guys can't seem to do anything but talk about JESUS: **We observed his star at its rising, they tell Herod, and have come to pay him homage (Mat 2:2, NRSV).** That's the SECOND frightening thing about Christmas. Something has happened in history that must necessarily – if we truly get it -- move the focus of our lives off of seeking to receive prestige and praise for ourselves and onto paying homage or honor to Jesus. Think of all the energy and money and time that goes into clothes and objects and pictures and posts that are consciously or unconsciously aimed at gaining the admiration of others.

I don't know about you, but I can be like the kid who asked his mom to play darts one day. "Mom," he said, "I'll stand here and throw the darts. And you stand over there and say, 'WONDERFUL.'" Can you relate at all? How many of us live to hear affirmations and accolades spoken toward us, rather than living to bring praise to the One whose name and nature truly are "Wonderful"? If you and I are in sync with the true spirit of Christmas, then we will become much more concerned about seeing Jesus' star rise, than about having others acknowledge the star on our door. We will become less focused on making an excellent impression on others for the sake of our good name than for the sake of His name. We will welcome even the fact that not everybody is into us as an opportunity to die-to-self more than we have, though dying-to-self is always a little bit scary.

There's another thing about Christmas that is frightening too. The coming of Jesus at Christmas threatens our power and position. It challenges our pursuit of prestige. But what may be hardest to take is that what happened in Bethlehem shatters our perceptions about the presence (or absence) of God. Back in the first century A.D., the Jewish people – especially the educated ones -- figured they had God's M.O. down. They believed He was mostly active in ancient times. They felt His primary interest was in whether people went to religious gatherings and observed rituals. They thought He was very high and mighty -- which is to say, extremely distant and not particularly related to daily life. A lot of people still view God this way. Maybe you do.

That's why what happened in that manger could maybe disturb somebody who understood it. As author Frederick Buechner put it: *"Those who believe in God can never, in a way, be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him in a stable, they can never be sure where He will appear, or to what lengths He will go, to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation He will descend in His wild pursuit of [humanity]. [For] if holiness and the power and majesty of God were present in... this birth of a peasant child, then there is no place or time so lowly or earthbound but that holiness can be present there too. And this means that... there is no place we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from His power to break in two and recreate the human heart."*

Christmas can tap into some of our deepest fears. Our power and position are threatened, our pursuit of prestige is challenged, our perceptions about the presence (or absence) of God are shattered. It's understandable why a person who got that would be tempted to keep Christmas contained – like the box we keep the ornaments in. Let's just regard Christmas as something to be taken out, viewed briefly, then kept in a closet for most of the year. In a sense, that's what Herod was trying to do when he ordered the genocide he subsequently did. He was trying to contain the danger of Christmas.

But, you know, the Bible teaches that fear is not always bad. The writer of Proverbs says: **The fear of the Lord is the beginning of WISDOM, and knowledge of the**

Holy One is understanding (Prov 9:10). That phrase -- fear of the Lord -- carries two senses. One is a sense of *appropriate terror* before a God who so belongs in our place on the throne; who is so worthy of the utter homage -- or tribute -- of our lives; who so mysteriously does show up how and where we least expect Him. But there is another connotation to that phrase "the fear of the Lord," as biblical people understand it. It is a sense of *wondrous awe* at the benefits of having a GOD like that.

So let me close today by sharing with you the wondrously awesome Good News of Christmas. First of all, since Jesus really is THE King, the good news is that we don't have to carry the weight of the throne. I think of a sculpture that stands outside the RCA building at Rockefeller Center in New York.¹ Maybe you've seen it. It's of Atlas holding up the world. The tautness of every sinew, the bend of his legs, the hunch of his back trying to hold up this world is like the way some of us feel too much of the time. It's tough to be King, to have the weight of the whole kingdom on your shoulders -- whether that kingdom is your home or workplace or the concerns of this troubled world.

But just across the street, is St. Patrick's Cathedral. It's right there in front of Atlas. It's as if all he needs to do is roll the weight away for a moment, cross the street, and go in. If he did, he would find another statue. This one is of a child. He has a look of peace on his face, a stance of ease and grace, and upon his outstretched hand -- balanced confidently, as if it were the most natural and comfortable thing possible -- is the globe of the world. The child is Jesus, and he can handle the weight. Give him the throne, will you? You'll be delighted with how He handles the job of carrying what you can't and making of your life all that it can be.

Secondly, since Jesus is really the one person worthy of homage, the good news is that we can relinquish the exhausting struggle to prove our value by winning prestige in the eyes of others. Wise men always know that the homage belongs to Him anyway. And yet the awesome truth is that Jesus' very coming into this world is God's way of saying to you, like that father to that little girl: "You are wonderful." In the eyes of the only Person whose opinion really counts in the end, you have already been esteemed -- deemed worthy of laying down gifts for -- even the gift of God's very life upon the Cross. So forget about whether YOUR star is rising or falling, will you? Put your efforts into pointing others towards Christ's glory, that others might receive the priceless gift of esteem, found only in Him.

And finally, think with me about this. The birth of Jesus shows us that God is unpredictably more present than we may think. The good news is that we never need worry we are in a place where God can't meet us. There is no dark stable that the Light of the World can't enter. He can meet you in your financial crisis. He can be born in you in a moment of arrogant success. He can enter into and change that relationship that seems to be dying or has gone dead. He can come alongside you in your illness. He can redeem and give purpose to these next years of your life. He can renew your

strength if you are weary. He can give us the courage to persevere till your winter gives way to the warmth of a new spring.

Only one thing is required -- one thing that Herod didn't know but Walter did. You see, nine-year-old Walter also had a part in the Christmas story -- actually a Christmas Pageant that year. Walter was one of those awkward kids that other children sometimes ignored or made fun of. When Walt's part came up, his mom nervously prayed that he'd remember his one line. At long last, the time came. Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of the motel in Bethlehem. As the door opened, and there stood Walter, the Innkeeper. His mom held her breath but she had nothing to worry about. Walt's voice rang out: *"There's no room at the Inn!"* And right on cue, pregnant Mary and faithful Joseph hung their heads, turned around, and walked away.

But what wasn't in the script, except in God's, was what happened next. A look of fearful concern suddenly spread across the brow of young Walt. The kind of look that was something between horror at what he'd done and terror at what he was about to do, and awe that he had the chance to do it. Suddenly, Walter cried out: *"Wait! Come back! You can have my room!!"*

And I believe the angels sang. And I know that grace broke in. And I'm sure that Christmas came to that pageant -- the real Christmas -- all over again. As it can happen in you and me, if we'll too say: *"Come in, Lord. You can have my room! My throne. In spite of my fears -- or maybe because of them -- there's room in my heart for... I choose to put my faith in... YOU."*

As we continue our journey toward Christmas, let God hear those MAGICAL words from you.

Please pray with me...

Dear God, help us to live more wisely and creatively than Herod. Stop us from trying to box up or banish the fearsome implications of your arrival in OUR kingdom. Instead, turn our terror into a joy-filled awe at what it can mean for us when we give you the throne, when we focus our lives on rendering homage to You, when we look for Your presence in the dark places of our life. You who are the light of this world, shine upon us, as we put our faith afresh in you, in the name of Jesus. And all God's people said, Amen.

ⁱ Thank you for this story to a former mentor and model of mine, Presbyterian pastor Bruce Larson, from his book *Believe and Belong* (Revel, 1982)