

How Will You React to the Christ Child?

- I. Feel Threatened?
- II. Feign Devotion?
- III. Bow Down?

*(Matthew 2:1-12) After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem {2} and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." {3} When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. {4} When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. {5} "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: {6} "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." {7} Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. {8} He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." {9} After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. {10} When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. {11} On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. {12} And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

Tell me, if I were to ask you to give me the name of someone you consider to be a “polarizing figure”, someone who kind of divides people into 2 camps, those who support him and those who are opposed to him, who would you think of? Maybe someone like Donald Trump or Scott Walker or Barack Obama. Or maybe a TV personality like Matt Lauer or Whoopi Goldberg or Sean Hannity. But maybe we should add one more name to the list of polarizing figures. How about the name, Jesus Christ? I mean, think about it, throughout his earthly ministry, you had some people who thought he was God and some people who thought he was the devil. Some who wanted to worship him and some who wanted to crucify him. But you realize, that kind of double reaction to Jesus didn't begin once Jesus became an adult. No, it was already evident when Jesus was just a baby.

In our text for today, we have a perfect example of that kind of double reaction to Jesus. On the one hand, the Magi wanted to worship Jesus, while King Herod wanted to kill him. Those two attitudes are still evident in our world today, in fact maybe in our own hearts and lives—to the point that maybe the question needs to be asked:

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- I. Will you Feel Threatened?
- II. Will you Feign Devotion?
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First, will you feel threatened by the Christ child? At first blush, the very thought of feeling threatened by a baby sounds absurd. I mean, who walks into the maternity wing of the

hospital all worried that they're going to be kicked around by some newborn infant? I mean, do you feel like you have to arm wrestle that baby to the ground to show him who's the boss? Of course not. Who feels threatened by a baby?

Well, actually, there was at least one person who once felt threatened by a baby. That person's name was Herod. Isn't that the truth? When the Magi from the East came to Jerusalem asking where to find the one born to be the king of the Jews, how did King Herod react? Matthew tells us. *When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed* (literally, he was shaken or stirred up. Today we might say he was agitated.) *and* (as Matthew goes on to say), *all Jerusalem with him*. The question is, Why? Why were both Herod and the city upset to hear that the king of the Jews had been born? Wouldn't this be good news for them? Uh, not if you happen to be a paranoid, non-Jewish government official who's trying to hang on to his power in the land of Judea. Not if you're the man who has already killed his mother in law, his brother-in-law, his wife and three of his sons because he perceived them to be threats to his throne. No, when King Herod catches wind that someone has arrived on the scene whom the Old Testament Scriptures foretold would be the king of the Jews, Herod freaks out. So does the rest of the city, because they are afraid of what Herod is going to do because of the perceived threat a newborn king.

But wait a minute. Is Herod the only one who has ever felt threatened by Jesus? How about the high priests and teachers of the Law back in Jesus' day? They felt that Jesus' popularity was going to cause them to lose their positions of authority. That's why they plotted to have Jesus put to death. They saw Jesus as a threat. Or, how about people today? People who say, "I think Christianity is too narrow minded, too judgmental. I want to be open to all religions. I want to be able to believe and do what I want to do."

In fact, isn't there a little of that attitude in all of us? Isn't there a little voice inside of us that says, "God, I want to do what I want to do"? In fact, can you name a single sin that is not, in its very essence, another way of saying, "God, not your will be done, but my will be done? God, I want to do what I want to do." Or as King Herod put it, "I don't want Christ to be the king. Rather, I want to be the king."

But now, you realize, going around telling people, "I want to be the king or I want more authority than God won't win you any popularity contests. I mean, most people would say, "You shouldn't be acting like you're God—especially if it means dissing baby Jesus. This was the dilemma that King Herod faced. Even though he saw Jesus as a threat, he didn't want to let on what his true feelings were. So what did he do? He faked his devotion to Jesus—which is still what many people do today. In fact, that brings us back to our original question: How will you react to the Christ child? II. Will you Feign Devotion?

Again, isn't that what King Herod did? Herod couldn't come right out and say, "I'm a wicked, self-centered egomaniac who would rather kill the Christ than worship him. That would not be politically correct. I mean, here you have these distinguished foreign guests who have traveled all the way to pay their respects to this new born citizen of your country. You can't tell them you're jealous of that baby. You can't tell them you want that child dead. So what do you do? You play along with the. You pretend you want to worship Jesus, too.

How does Saint Matthew put it? *Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."* (Matthew 2:7-8)

Hmmm. Isn't it ironic that the man who would soon order that every child under the age of 2 in the vicinity of Bethlehem be put to death—isn't it ironic that that man here was saying

that he wants to worship one of those children? No, maybe that's not so unusual. How many people today say that they are Christians, they say that they want to worship Christ, but in their heart of hearts, they don't want Christ on the throne. They want to look good to others, even though their heart is devoted to something other than God.

In fact, are there times when that attitude applies to you and me. Times when we just kind of go through the motions of worship, even if our heart is not in it. Are there times when what Jesus said about the people of his day is still true of you and me today. *These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me (Matthew 15:8)*. Too often, we're the ones who are guilty of hypocrisy. We are the ones who claim to be Christians and then act like anything but. And for that, God should have kicked us out of his world forever.

But instead of kicking us out of his world, what did God do? He put himself into our world. God took on flesh and was born as the babe of Bethlehem. You might say that God left his throne in heaven and took up residence first in a mother's womb and then in a manger and finally in someone else's house in the city of Bethlehem. And even though that little God/Man didn't look like royalty, there were some very wise men who recognized his true identity and acted accordingly. The question is, will we do the same? Or to put it another way, when it comes to the question How Will You React to the Christ Child, III. Will You Bow Down?

Certainly, that's what the Magi did, isn't it? Matthew records what happened with these words, *On coming to the house, they saw the child with its mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh*. Now someone might ask, why would these wise men bring to a baby gifts like gold? (What, does the baby need the money? Does he have a lot of medical bills to pay?) Or incense? (No baby should be playing with incense, right?) Or myrrh? (This sticky smelly resin used to embalm people—what baby needs that?) Why not give Jesus a rattle or some diapers? The answer? The Magi didn't give these gifts because Jesus needed them or because they were so valuable to Jesus. No, the Magi gave these gifts because they were valuable to them. They wanted to give to Jesus their best and finest possessions.

Isn't the same thing true for you and me today? It's not like God needs our offerings. God already owns everything in the world. No, by giving to God the things that we value, be it our time or our money, we're basically saying, "This is how much you mean to me, Lord. I want to give you my best!"

But maybe more fundamental than the question, "Why did the Magi give the gifts they did?" is the question, "What were they doing there in the first place? What prompted these men to travel hundreds and hundreds of miles in search of a baby?" There's only one answer. The answer is simply this. Somehow God had revealed to these men that their savior has been born. If the Magi were from the land of Babylon (which is very likely) maybe it was the Jews who were held in captivity at the time of Daniel who shared with the Magi Old Testament prophecies like the one recorded in Numbers 24:17. *A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel*. Or maybe these wise men came from even further away. Maybe they came from the land of Sheba, which is present day Yemen, as we heard in our Old Testament reading today. *All from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord. (Isaiah 64:6)*

Regardless of how the Magi learned about the Christ child, the fact is, the Holy Spirit led them to see that child for who he really was. Jesus not as a threat to their authority, but as the solution to their greatest problem. He was their savior from sin.

My friends, isn't the same thing still true for you and me today? By the power of the Holy Spirit, working through word and Sacrament, God has opened our eyes to see Jesus' true identity

and purpose. Jesus has not come to threaten us or to strip us of our freedom or to force us to bend the knee in devotion to him. No, he came to save us, love us and to forgive us and to set us free from the wicked forces inside and outside of us. That's why we're not afraid to call Jesus our Lord and King. It's why we pray, "Come Lord Jesus, set up your kingdom in my heart. Kick that sinful, selfish nature off the throne and establish yourself there instead. Rule my heart with your word, your love and mercy, for then I will be able to truly live my life to your glory and praise. God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.