
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

How Many Kings Does It Take
to Find a Baby?

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-4, 9-12

So, just how many kings does it take to find a baby?

I'm not sure, but how many fisherman does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but you should have seen the size of that light bulb!

How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? Four. One to screw in the new bulb and three to talk about how much they will miss the old one. In an equal opportunity to offend everyone, how many UCC people does it take to change a light bulb? Change? My grandmother gave me that light bulb!

So how many kings does it take to find a baby?

Let's start by clearing our heads of all the Christmas pageants we have ever seen or been a part of, banishing the images of boys and men in bathrobes with Burger King crowns, carrying wrapped presents and trying to look wise and regal. Let's clear our heads from the images that they were all men. At least one must have been a woman, because what group of men traveling would have stopped and asked for directions? Sorry, cheap shot. Let's clear our heads about our Christmas carols, "We Three Kings of Orient Are". Nowhere does the Gospel of Matthew say there were three kings. Maybe the three kings comes from the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but it says treasure chests. Whoever they were and whatever they brought, from wherever they came, was a caravan: men and women, camels, support vehicles, tents, food, water, security detail. They were foreigners, coming from *somewhere* into the land of Judea, in the time of Roman rule by an unstable King Herod, a man who was ego-driven enough to call himself "King of the Jews".

"Imagine the expression on King Herod's face when his staff informed him of erudite philosophers of wealth and status entering the city. At first, he must have believed these individuals of brilliance and prestige had traveled for months to know more about the one who was great in his own mind. After all, from Herod's perspective, he was the most important person in Jerusalem. The king might have believed that **he** had 'arrived'. Sadly, he learned, the magi were not inquiring about how to meet with him. They were asking the natives, "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" (2.2)"¹

When Herod heard this, he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him. The natives knew that you did not make King Herod mad. When King Herod was frightened, people died. I would not have wanted to be one of King Herod's chief priests or scribes of the people. These were the people on King Herod's payroll, his trusted advisors, the experts in the law and its interpretation, the supply of candidates for the high priesthood. They were the ones who were to protect King Herod, King of the Jews, from all outside threats. They were the ones who were supposed to keep King Herod secure on his throne. "Dear guests from the East, I do not know if you are magicians and frauds. I do not know if you are astrologers who read the heavens and advise your rulers. I do not know if you are priests yourselves in your own country who come here to threaten my power. But welcome. Tell me more. You have been studying. You have eyes to see. Tell me what you know of this birth.

¹ Feasting on the Word, p. 213.

A child born into a peasant family, who is being proclaimed as my successor, tell me more. tell me all.”

Can't you just see the listeners to the Gospel of Matthew leaning forward in their chairs, begging to hear what happened next? They had never heard this part of the story before. Mark did not tell about kings. Luke mentioned nothing of magi. The Apostle Paul told only of the early church communities, mostly outsiders, Gentiles, who had begun to follow Jesus. But these were the insiders, Matthew's own Christian Jewish community, Jews who already believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promise and Israel's yearning. What they were hearing in this story, of a true “King of the Jews”, of a ruler being born in Bethlehem who was to shepherd my people Israel and be a king of peace: these listeners were hearing Micah and Isaiah and prophets of old. Not predictions, but fulfillment. God promised and God fulfilled God's promise: the abiding presence of God with us is true.² Leaning on the edge of their chairs, they listened, “Did they find the baby? What did they do? What happened next? Did they tell Herod?”

Nope, they brought all the grandeur of all of creation and poured it out at the feet of the Lord of all. They had brought all that was precious to them, what they wanted Jesus to have. The entourage of seekers did not build a mansion in Bethlehem to stay near this one they had worshipped. And they were wise, not stupid, so no one had to be warned not to go back through Jerusalem and that megalomaniac ruler Herod. They departed “by another road”.

I came upon a 2001 sermon by Old Testament scholar and professor Walter Brueggemann entitled “Off by Nine Miles”. You see, Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem and you could read the story that the wise men missed their goal by nine miles, coming into Jerusalem, with all its great pretensions, and then they were redirected to Bethlehem, a rural place, dusty, unnoticed and unpretentious. The wise men, rather than hesitate or resist, had to reorganize their wealth and learning, and they have to reorient themselves and their lives around a baby who had no credentials.³

Is not that what we are called to do? Is not Matthew telling his spellbound listeners and all of us “a tantalizing hint about life for those who have met the Christ? Nothing is ever the same. Perhaps you had your destination all set. You had your life and the lives of those around you all figured out. Everything and everyone had a place. It was neat. Ordered. Efficient. Tidy.

And then you discovered you were off by nine miles. Something changed. In you. In them. In the world round you. In all of those things. And suddenly you had to unfold a new map and, and discover an alternate path.”⁴ Because you had met the Christ, you had to reorient yourself to that new star.

Where before you sought power over others, now you stand with.

² The First Christmas, Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, p. 212.

³ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2103>

⁴ Feasting on the Word, p. 216.

Where before you accumulated your wealth, now you give away, live with less, decide what is most important in life.

Where before you would be angry and hold a grudge, even speak ill of others, now, having met the Christ, you don't. You hold that thought. You think a better thought. You forgive and move ahead, following a new map of reconciliation and peace.

Is it easy? Not really. Is it comfortable? No, it is strange and unfamiliar.

At the beginning of this new church year, Advent to Christmastide to Epiphany, as well as a new calendar year, we get the opportunity to make choices about which roads we will travel. We can keep going down the road to nowhere, the road to me, myself, and I, the road to the past, always looking through the rearview mirror. Or we can look at the new map in front us. We can plug in new addresses to the GPS. What is our destination? Show me the road of love and compassion. Take me to the place where justice rolls down and show me a way that I can be a part of that. Direct me through all the side streets and help me to not be distracted or to go down those dead ends, or in Phoenix, streets with 'no outlet'. I dare say the road we are looking for, having met the Christ, is still the road less travelled. It is the road, however, I believe that makes all the difference us to walk it together.

Blessings and peace. Amen.