

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HEROD AND THE MAGI”
Matthew 2:1-13, 16-17

{Jn 1:14} **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”**

✍ When it comes down to it, there are only two fitting responses to Christ’s birth: reverent surrender and sacrilegious resistance.

📖 (Some of us might not be familiar with these words. **Reverence is *profound respect, admiration, or worship*. Sacrilege is *extreme disrespect, contempt, or scorn*.**)

Has this contention caught you off guard? Allow me to repeat it...

I am not saying these responses are equally *true* or *good*. To the contrary, they are theological, spiritual, and moral opposites.

- ♦ Still, reverent surrender and sacrilegious resistance have this in common: they are proportional. Of all our potential responses, only these are big enough.

- ♦ {Jn 1:14} Reverent surrender and sacrilegious resistance also have this in common: they are perceptive. More than other responses, these signify some awareness of who **“the Word”** is and why he **“became flesh.”**

Reverent surrender *and* sacrilegious resistance are more proportional and perceptive than indifference, historical curiosity, theological abstraction, or a merely verbal confession of faith.

Reverent surrender *and* sacrilegious resistance are more proportional and perceptive than the sentimental devotion of churchgoers who celebrate the *nativity* joyfully, tenderly, *devoutly*, but not the *Incarnation* – who assign the Son his place in the manger, but deny him his rightful place on the throne of their lives.

- Please turn with me to Matthew 2:13 and 16:

When [the wise men have] gone, an angel of the Lord [appears] to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

When Herod [realizes] that he [has] been outwitted...he [is] furious... he [gives] orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who [are] two years old and under, in accordance with the time he...learned from the Magi.

Herod the Great is the very definition of a ruthless tyrant. His priorities are upside down, his actions are evil, and the consequences of his sin are horrific. This is sacrilegious resistance at its worst.

- ♦ Still, let’s give credit where credit is due. Herod’s response is proportional: it reflects the cosmic magnitude of Christ’s advent.

{Col 1:15; Jn 1:14} Jesus of Nazareth is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity and **“the image of the**

invisible God.” He **“became flesh and made his dwelling among us”!**

‡ This warrants something bigger than jaded indifference, superficial merrymaking, or sentimental devotion. Shouldn’t we react to the Lord’s presence with at least as much energy, passion, and resolute action as Herod, albeit in a different direction?

◆ Not only is Herod’s response proportional, it is strangely perceptive.

I say “strangely” because the eyes of his heart are blind. He does not identify Jesus as Emmanuel.

Even so, he sees past the humble circumstances to the deeper reality. He sees past the child’s physical, social, economic, and political weakness to his hidden power.

{Eph 6:12; Is 11:4; Mt 2:2; Lk 1:52, 53} This wicked king discerns more clearly than most that the boy presents a significant threat to **“the rulers... authorities”** and **“powers of this dark world.”** Herod does not assume that the prophecy of a just ruler who **“will give decisions for the poor”** is a spiritual metaphor. He rightly fears that **“the one who has been born”** will “[scatter the] **proud ... [bring] down rulers from their thrones”** and “[send] **the rich away empty.”**

It does not enter Herod’s mind that Jesus has come to be his Savior. In this he is fatally mistaken. Many of us know what Herod does not. We get it: Jesus is our Savior, and we love him for it!

Herod *is* keenly aware that Messiah has come to be his King. He knows that this child will assert sovereignty

over every aspect of his life: private and public, individual and corporate, spiritual and material. In this he is right.

Evidently, some of us lack Herod’s knowledge. We do not think, speak, and act as though the Son’s reign extends beyond spirituality and personal relationships to our work, politics, money, sex, and power.

‡ Shouldn’t we who bear the name “Christian” treat Christ’s sovereignty more seriously than his enemy Herod? Shouldn’t we manifest his dominion? Shouldn’t we bow to him as King as fervently and consistently as we embrace him as Savior?

■ Now verses 1-12, the account of the Magi’s visit.

★ The Wise Men’s actions have *surrender* written all over them.

■ In verse 1 they come to Jerusalem **“from the east.”**

We cannot identify their point of origin with certainty. The title **“Magi”** was originally a Persian term; but by the first century it applies to magicians and astrologers from Persia, Babylon, Arabia, and other eastern countries.

Regardless, they have come from far away.

{S. Anitei, “Softpedia”} Long-distance travel is *s-l-o-w* with a capital “S.” A camel’s average speed in a caravan has been clocked at 2.2 miles per hour.

Long-distance travel is *uncomfortable*. The route **“from the east”** passes through vast tracts of

semi-desert and outright desert. Travelers can expect burning heat during the day, bone-chilling cold at night, and a shortage of inns along the way.

Long-distance travel is *dangerous*. In addition to dehydration and heat stroke, there are venomous spiders and snakes, suffocating sandstorms, the occasional lion, and gangs of bandits on the hunt for easy prey.

Long-distance travel is *expensive*. It takes a lot of coin to purchase, outfit, and feed camels; to stock up on essential supplies; and to contract a guide and servants or to pay the fees to join a caravan.

- Later, in verse 12, the Magi present Jesus **“with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”**

{Fred Horton, Wake Forest University} **“Gold... [is] as precious in the first century as it”** will be in 2014.

As for Frankincense and myrrh, they are at their historic **“height of value around the time of Jesus’ birth.”** The Magi have probably paid the equivalent of \$500 per pound for frankincense. Myrrh is much more expensive, running about \$4,000 per pound.

These men willingly sacrifice their time, comfort, and security for the sake of an unknown child. Then they give their costliest possessions to this boy, whom they will never meet again. This is surrender!

- ★ Their actions also exemplify *reverence*.

- In verse 2 the Wise Men explicitly announce that their purpose is **“to worship” “the one who has been born king of the Jews.”** And upon finding him **“They [bow] down and [worship] him”** (verse 11).

📖 Προσκυνεω [proskuneō] can simply mean to pay homage to a human dignitary. Under such circumstances, it is nothing more than a synonym for *honor* or *pay tribute to*.

📖 {R.T. France; Mt 14:33; 28:9, 17} **“But Matthew frequently uses [προσκυνεω] it in a context where Jesus’ more-than-human status is recognized.”** And so, for example, it is Matthew’s verb of choice when Messiah calms the storm and the Twelve **“[worship] him, saying, ‘You are the Son of God,’”** and again when Christ appears to his followers after his resurrection and they **“[worship] him”**).

It is reasonable to infer that when the Magi bow down and worship the Christ child, it is not as unto a mortal monarch. Their gifts reinforce this conclusion.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh are not just jaw-droppingly expensive. In the Ancient Near East they express honor and even veneration.

Aside from its obvious monetary value, gold is an icon of power and prestige.

{F Horton} Frankincense is a potent religious symbol. It is a vital component in the blend of incense that is burned in the temple Jerusalem and at many other sacred places around the Ancient World. Some believe that it physically **“carries prayers up to God.”**

Myrrh is used to perfume the bodies of the dead – but not just *any* dead. As costly as myrrh is, luxurious burials are generally reserved for the superrich.

{Rev 19:16} The Magi worship Jesus as One with transcendent status. They present him with extravagant gifts worthy of the “**King of kings.**” This is reverence!

This Christmas, God is giving us another opportunity

...

To wash our hands of indifference;

To turn our backs on historical curiosity, theological abstraction, and a merely verbal faith;

To be done with the kind of sentimental devotion that assigns the Son his place in the manger, but denies him his rightful place on the throne.

{Jn 1:14; MT 2:2} “**The Word**” has taken on “**flesh and made his dwelling among us.**” Jesus “**has been born king of the Jews.**”

Will we respond proportionally? Will we respond perceptively? Will we respond in reverent surrender?

Matthew chapter 2 is the word of the Lord.