

We are just coming through the Christmas season. Whew. Our culture focuses on consumerism and secularism and in many ways it has taken over the sacredness of worshipping Jesus.

We live in a difficult culture; not only are we constantly bombarded by forces that entice us to worship them—instead of Jesus—but injustice exists.

Particularly frustrating are experiencing people who use control to climb into positions of power. And almost always, those who have power tread on the backs of the poor, the lowly, and the powerless in order to maintain control.

As followers of Jesus we work to bring shalom, but we can also be consumed with what is wrong in the world. Yet, for us, there *should* be a different understanding of life where we hold the paradox of a broken world in line with the hope of Jesus.

That hope can seem illusive. Not only can it seem illusive, but also along the way we can become bitter, and spiteful, and hateful. We can become just like the world instead of being salt and light.

And we make choices every day whether to give into hate, or turn against the current of culture and choose love and life. These choices are not simple. Sometimes we do choose hate, and we need reminders to choose love and life.

As we live our lives, we are reminded that the journey—though fraught with adventure laced with trials—can also be a journey of hope and redemption.

The magi give us this picture.

The magi are outsiders. Initially they are not looking for the Messiah. In fact, they represent the spiritual elite of the Gentile world; those who have take pagan wisdom as far as it goes.¹ They were astrologers who saw something different in the vast night sky—something significant and something worthy to embark on a journey. So they packed their belongings

¹ Richard B. Gardner, “Matthew,” in *Believers Church Bible Commentary*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 46.

and left. They were practicing the common custom in that day of paying homage to neighboring Kings.

They didn't know the kind of journey they would be on. They didn't know the twists and turns that awaited them. They didn't know the epic nature of their adventure, or its significance. Nor did they know or understand that they would be pawns in an epic battle of good versus evil. The journey was not the journey they intended to take: but it became the journey of their life that climaxed in worshipping the king of kings and the lord of lords—more on that later. First things first...



Herod was a brute of a man; Power-hungry he became manipulative, secretive, and violent.

Would you like to meet with this guy? Yeah...me either.

Herod was Proudful and Powerful and Paranoid. But what really made him brutal was his fear of losing power. This became his passion and his madness; he became defined by his hatred.

Side Lesson

There is a lesson to be learned: power is seductive and it corrupts. We must remember that as we walk through our daily lives in whatever positions we hold.

The magi come to Jerusalem in search of the king of the Jews. Herod greets them and after conferring with his advisors, he meets with the Magi in secret. Why? Because people who have something to hide meet in secret. People who have ulterior motives meet in secret. People who are paranoid about losing power, or reputation, meet in secret in order to manipulate and control. It’s why transparency is so important.

There is also something else going on here.

In taking a canonical view of scripture we can see the ultimate battle occurring through John of Patmos’ vision. You can look at Revelation 12 for this picture.

Following Jesus requires humility and giving up power...versus evil and hatred that tries to hold onto power and privilege and does so through persecution, fear, and oppression.

And the Gospel writer of Matthew is clear on the distinction between evil and good. The Magi and Herod story—what we call Epiphany—shows us there are opposite reactions to Christ from the earliest days: this is a story of acceptance and rejection of Jesus.² When the Magi pay homage to Jesus they are actually foreshadowing the worship of Jesus as the risen Lord in Matthew 28.³

The writer of Matthew is a Jew writing to Jews, and he emphasizes the Magi story because it also echoes the story of Moses leading the people out of Egypt.⁴ Indeed, the first-century Hebrew people were looking for a Messiah to ultimately save them from the exile of Imperial Rome. They believed in a Mosaic-figure that would enter the fracas and fragility of first-century geopolitics and redeem the nation of Israel through conquest. So the Gospel writer connects the dots for the Jewish people—Jesus is the Messiah.

Herod also knew about Messiah leading his people out of exile and bondage. So when he heard the Magi asking about the King of the Jews, he is the one that exclaims Messiah. But he was threatened, deeply threatened, because he

² Donald A. Hagner, “Matthew 1-13,” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D.W. Watts and Ralph P. Martin, vol. 33A, (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 23-24.

³ Gardner, 47.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, “Infancy Narratives in the NT Gospels,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 3 H-J, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 412.

thought Messiah would be a political figure and take over his power. And he hated the Messiah because of it.

Hate does awful things, you know.

What do you do on Sundays where you are angry? Or bitter? Or full of hatred for someone? Do you enter into worship? Or do you secretly—or not so secretly even—wish for their destruction and demise?

How does that affect our worship? Well, you see, it's impossible to hold onto hatred and worship at the same time. I know...I've tried.

It's interesting to note that the very first beatitude in Matthew 5 is:

Blessed are the poor in Spirit...

Blessed are those that know they need God! Blessed are those that recognize they need a Savior! Blessed are those that know they can't do life on their own! And the action of this recognition? WORSHIP!

Because when we have a relationship with God, everything changes, and we worship. We understand we can't do life on our own. We understand that we mess up more times than seems possible. We understand sin and our absolute desperate need of GRACE.

And even with this understanding we constantly have to choose life, choose love, and choose grace. We have to choose to worship.

You know, I've walked into worship services fuming mad. And I've walked out...fuming mad, because I didn't enter into authentic worship; I didn't enter into a space where I laid everything down at the foot of the cross. In my pride—in those moments of self-absorption—I did not enter into worship because I was focused on myself.

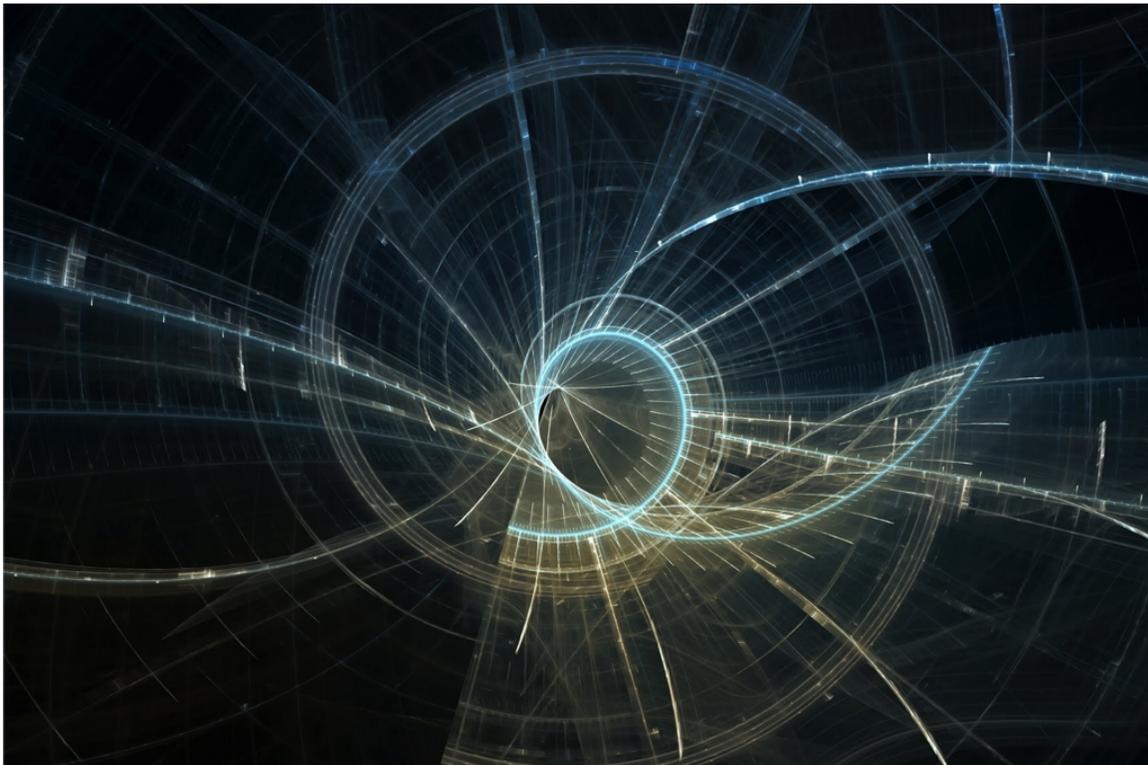
Herod does not want to pay tribute to the Messiah. Herod does not want to worship the Messiah. Herod is self-absorbed and doesn't even recognize his need to worship. I've been there too. Have you?

It is impossible to hold onto hate and worship at the same time. This is different than brokenness. We can come into worship as broken people and

come out of worship as broken people, because brokenness is a state of being, not an attitude. It's not like choosing to be bitter, or choosing to hold onto anger, or choosing to hate. We can't worship, truly worship, if we have ulterior motives and impure attitudes. It is impossible.

What I am talking about here is different than when bad things happen to us. When those things happen we go through the stages of grief, and we all do that at our own pace. But, if we become stuck...if we only focus on our brokenness over a long period of time, then bitterness and hatred can seep in. And this happens to all of us at times that have walked the halls of brokenness. It is part of being human, and it is why being part of a healthy, wholesome community is so vital that can encourage us and bear our burdens.

But if we choose to hate someone, for whatever reason, we are choosing death over life. We are choosing ourselves over God. And it is impossible to fully worship.



For you science folks out there, it's kind of like the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle that comes from quantum mechanics: the more precisely the

position of some particle is known, the less precisely its momentum can be known.

It is the same with worship.

The more precisely we focus on ourselves, the less precisely we enter into authentic worship. The more we hang onto hate, the less we hang onto Jesus. BUT, the more we focus on worshipping Jesus, the less we are preoccupied with ourselves and our attitudes, and even at times, our circumstances.

Herod shows us the ugly side of the uncertainty principle. The magi show us the beauty of it. Herod wants to eliminate the threat to his rule. The magi want to honor a King. Herod conspires in secret. The magi travel as a community of three. Herod is used by evil to try and eliminate the hope of humankind and all of creation. The magi are used by God to announce salvation has come for all of creation.

The Magi traveled on a journey to honor a King and end up announcing that the king of all kings, and the lord of all lords was born—the Kingdom of God now, and yet to come.

There have been times where I've also walked into services with hatred on my heart...and walked out with peace. Somehow during the course of worship God's Spirit penetrated my stubborn heart, and I found myself clutching to Jesus. Has this happened to you?



[Story of Bell Choir at CMC]

The climax of the Epiphany story is presented in verses 11-12 with three verbs—they worshipped, they offered, and they departed.⁵ Note that the passage starts with worship in verse two. It now ends with worship in verse 11. The presence of the Messianic king demands a decision, and this decision causes division between those who accept and those who reject him.⁶ Those who accept him fall down and worship. And they worship him because he is worthy to be worshipped. He is the King of Kings. He is the Lord of Lords. He is our Messiah. He is Immanuel—God with us. He is our Savior, and the savior of all creation. And we follow him.

It reminds me of a beautiful but simple song I sung as a kid. Maybe you know it too.

[Slide—I have decided to follow Jesus]

John of Patmos’ vision captures this image with amazing beauty in Revelation 5 (New Living Translation):

⁵ Hagner, 25.

⁶ Ibid., 32.

Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. There was writing on the inside and the outside of the scroll, and it was sealed with seven seals.



2 And I saw a strong angel, who shouted with a loud voice: "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?" **3** But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll and read it.

4 Then I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll and read it. **5** But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals."

6 Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which represent the sevenfold Spirit of God that is sent out into every part of the earth. **7** He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. **8** And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the

twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

9 And they sang a new song with these words:

"You are worthy to take the scroll
and break its seals and open it.
For you were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people
for God

from every tribe and language and people and nation.

10 And you have caused them to become
a Kingdom of priests for our God.
And they will reign on the earth."

11 Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. **12** And they sang in a mighty chorus:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—
to receive power and riches
and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and blessing."

13 And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang:

"Blessing and honor and glory and power
belong to the one sitting on the throne
and to the Lamb forever and ever."

14 And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb.

And so we too worship the lamb that was slain. We worship the one that overcame sin, and death, and evil, and hell. We worship the Risen Christ. We worship the Great I Am. We worship the one who subverts power and reconciles all of creation. We worship the one who is worthy to be worshipped. And we follow the steps of the Magi: we worship Jesus as the risen Lord. Hallelujah.