

The Clash of Kings (Matthew 2:1-12)

Jennifer and I were talking the other day. I celebrated my 15th anniversary here at Douglass on Monday. So, we were commenting on other work anniversaries within the past couple of months. Our music director, Ben Powell, also celebrated an anniversary this week—his tenth; while Amy Powell has been here even longer than I have (I'm not sure of the correct number of years). Joanna, our financial secretary, recently celebrated her 20th here. Our organist, Alan Martin, will celebrate his 10th anniversary next year. And, of course, Jennifer has been here for over 21 years.

It says a great deal about a congregation to have that kind of longevity in its staff. Either we're all the victims of some next-level mind-control stuff, or this is just a great place to be. I suspect I can speak for the others when I say that, at least in our estimation, it's the former and not the latter. Being the pastor of Douglass Boulevard Christian Church is how I'd draw it up if

someone asked me to imagine what the perfect job for me would look like.

So, thank you. From all of us, thank you. This place feels not only like home but also makes the thought of other jobs impossible to imagine.

But, at least for me, this wasn't supposed to be my life. After my last ministry position, I never wanted to work in a church again. Putting it that way makes me sound decisive and in control of my destiny. But, in reality, my wife saw what ministry had cost me and told me she'd divorce me if I ever tried to be a pastor again.

For those of you who don't know, the way I got started at DBCC was as a three-month interim when Dean Bucalos, my predecessor here, went on sabbatical, and the fine people of DBCC and the Lilly Endowment hired me to fill in over the summer of 2006 before I was to start teaching in the Fall. The whole experience was so wonderful and healing that when Steven

Johns-Boehme, an associate regional minister and a member here, called me after Thanksgiving a year later in 2007 (and Melissa Newell-Smith shortly thereafter) and asked if I'd like to come back to do another interim after Dean moved on to other things, it was an easy decision (for Susan and I both).

Absolutely!

But I never intended to stick around longer than a year or a year and a half. So, as I thought of it then, this job was fine while I was preparing to finish my Ph.D. and start over again as a university professor. In fact, it seemed perfect as a short-term gig. Work with and for people I cared about for a little while until I could move on to the next exciting stage of my career, all while making some much-needed money. What the kids call a "win-win."

But the thing of it was, those first six months were difficult. First, we had a staff shake-up over a serious issue. We had a sizable

scandal among some members that broke several people's hearts. Someone who'd asked to pray in our sanctuary went into our balcony and stole thousands of dollars worth of sound equipment. Finally, we initiated and completed the months-long process of becoming an Open and Affirming congregation, publicly vowing to welcome and celebrate our LGBTQ siblings—which was an especially tense process because five years prior, that process same process had led to several people leaving the church.

Oh, and Dominic was born, and I had to study for and pass three Comprehensive Exams for my degree. That was my first six months on the job here.

Then, on June 28th, 2008, the congregation voted to become Open and Affirming ... without a single dissenting vote. I went home and told Susan about it. Her words to me were: "If you want to keep working there permanently, I guess you'd better tell somebody."

So, I called Dick Burks, who was on the Pastoral Search Committee, on Sunday afternoon, June 28th, 2008, and told him I'd like to be considered for the permanent job of Senior Pastor ... if the church thought that would be a good idea. Apparently, in March 2009, they did because they voted to call me ... and here I am.

But here's the thing: I didn't realize I **wanted** this job until long after I'd agreed to start working here. From **my** perspective, this was entirely the wrong career for me. I'd always wanted to be a university professor. I don't think I **ever** wanted to be a minister.

And let's be honest, I can't imagine many places taking a look at me and thinking, "Yeah, that guy should be our next minister."

So, this was the **wrong** job, and I was the **wrong** guy.

That ever happen to you? You have a picture of how things are supposed to be, a vision of how the world is supposed to be arranged, only to find out that not only were you wrong ... you were utterly, shockingly, ***blessedly*** wrong.

You know what I'm talking about?

That's the subtext of our Gospel this morning: everything about it is wrong—the place is wrong, the people are wrong. Even the king is wrong.

I mean, look at the cast that makes up the moving parts of this little drama. You've got a vulnerable new child bride and mother.

You've got the guy whose pals down at Jewish Carpenters' Local #218 are convinced he'd been cuckolded by an unwed pregnant teenage girl.

You've got a client-ruler who calls himself the "King of the Jews," who's only **half** Jewish (and has always, therefore, been greeted with suspicion by his Jewish subjects).

And then, if all that wasn't enough, you've got some directionally-challenged magi who've traveled a great distance around the Fertile Crescent, coming to see another king ... about whom they know shockingly little.

Let's start there. These magi, about whom we sing on Epiphany Sunday, are most likely Persian and Zoroastrian—which is to say, they were Gentiles. Nevertheless, they believed they read the stars correctly and were on the verge of some great sign.

Now, we've tended to glorify these Persian emissaries. We've called them kings and wise men. I mean, they brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh ... and were obviously well connected enough to have some sense of both prophecy and how to read

the stars. So that feels like some serious credibility right there. Foreign dignitaries and all.

But see, that's where we tend to get off track. These weren't kings; they were magi. And in the rest of the ancient world, magi always had a pretty sticky reputation with people in power. Rulers always seemed to want mages on their side ... that is, until the mages prophesied something the power brokers didn't want to hear ... like the coming of the king's impending death or defeat. (Think Merlin and King Arthur.)

And it was **worse** in Palestine. Jews had a big thing about magi. God had commanded God's people to avoid magic, sorcery, and witchcraft—which, if you'll note, is really kind of part of the job description in the Magi HR Employee Handbook. As a result, magi were often the kind of people who found themselves on the sharp end of the Jewish legal stick.

Additionally, part of what made Jews so antsy around these **particular** magi was not only the fact that they were Gentiles **and** magi, but they could also read the stars—something the Jews were always suspicious of.

Definitely the wrong sorts of people to read the signs and go to great trouble to visit Jesus. Somebody else should have been leading that parade—certainly not stargazing, Gentile magi.

But what's the problem if you follow that logic?

Nobody else **does** go. Think about it. When Herod, the guy called the **King of the Jews**, hears about the magi who've come looking for the messiah, he panics. Remember, **messiah** wasn't some spiritual honorific like Lord or Savior. **Messiah** was a role, a person—an honest-to-goodness flesh-and-blood human being who was set apart by God to stand against God's enemies. And whatever messianic expectation existed in Jesus' time, the issue that unified the Jews of Palestine was getting rid of the Romans

and their greedy political lackeys, who kept almost everyone else poor, so that a few people could be rich.

A messiah, a Hebrew word translated as “God’s anointed,” was a political/military leader raised up by God as a kind of champion whose job was to defeat God’s enemies. The ancient Jewish belief was that a messiah could be anyone God chose at a particular time and place to overcome God’s enemies and restore Jewish political and religious sovereignty.

Messiahs were not a rare thing, either. It wasn’t until the end of the first century, after Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed by the Romans, that people started talking about **the** Messiah.

Reza Aslan points out, for example, that

Jesus ... was likely born the same year that Judas the Galilean—Judas the failed messiah, son of Hezekiah the

failed messiah—rampaged through the countryside, burning with zeal. [Jesus] would have been about ten years old when the Romans captured Judas, crucified his followers, and destroyed Sepphoris.

And Sepphoris was just up the road from Nazareth, Jesus' boyhood hometown.

As it stands, then, King Herod, the king who'd sufficiently brown-nosed Caesar enough to become Caesar's man in Palestine, had a great deal to fear from anyone who might be a rival for the title of "King of the Jews." Herod knew what we, living in 2023, know: You need to take potential insurrectionists seriously and put them down before they ever build up enough support to storm the palace and vote one of their own into power.

Consequently, Herod had a great deal to fear from **any** messiah who would, by definition, be a potential political threat.

So, Herod calls all the chief priests and the scribes together and asks them where **this** messiah was supposed to be born. The position of the high priest was a political appointment made by Herod. So, when Herod summoned the chief priests and the scribes, he was calling one of his cabinet members and their staff.

This political entourage promptly tells Herod that, according to the prophet Micah, a messiah was supposed to be born in the little town of Bethlehem. This otherwise forgettable little hamlet had one crucial distinguishing characteristic: it was also the home of the **greatest** King of the Jews, King David. **That** news would have given Herod an even more intense bout of heartburn. But royal nostalgia aside, tiny, insignificant Bethlehem is definitely the **wrong** place for a new king to be born. Instead, he should have been born in Jerusalem, the Palestinian heart of Roman power and Jewish religious authority.

Warren Carter writes, “[But] in God’s scheme, Bethlehem is the place of new creation, Jerusalem the place of fear because God’s actions challenge (in)vested interests and power.”

So, how does Herod handle the news about the birth of a potential new political rival?

Not well. He secretly summons these wandering Persian magi, whom he sends on a reconnaissance mission to Bethlehem. He tries to convince them that his interest in this messiah from Bethlehem is purely benign; he just wants to know where this sawed-off little political upstart, I mean, darling little tyke, is. He just wants to send his regards, a box of Pampers, and a case of difficult-to-find baby formula.

But the magi immediately sense something’s up. The fact that Herod called them “secretly” was a tip-off: He didn’t view these well-traveled magi as dignitaries but as servants. If Herod had been on the up and up, diplomatic protocol dictated that he

receive them publicly. So calling them in secret indicates that Herod is up to something, and he views them as servants he can order around to spy on his potential political rival.

If Herod **really** wanted to know where the messiah was so that he could go himself and offer worship, he wouldn't have dispatched spies; he would have put together a team of diplomatic envoys, gotten in his heavily-armored presidential limo, and gone to see the baby himself—king to potential king. But he doesn't go. Instead, he stays where he is and waits for intel.

To recap so far: the magi, who were the wrong people, are apparently the only ones paying close enough attention to read the signs and make the arduous journey to honor the coming of a new "King of the Jews." Of course, all of that **should** have been undertaken by the guy who **currently** called himself the "King of the Jews" and should have been led by the people who were **supposed** to be the religious leaders of the Jews.

And, frankly, if this were a story about **smart** politics, the magi would have **found** this new king in Washington, D.C., not Harlan. Instead, the new messiah was born in the wrong place. And to put a sharper point on it, he was born to the wrong people—a local artisan and an unwed mother from nowhere.

And having learned where this new Messiah is, Herod sends the wrong kind of delegation. If his interest in finding this new messiah were innocent, he would have sent a political/religious delegation to do the advance work so that the current “King of the Jews” could properly pay his respects to the **potential** “King of the Jews.” Instead, Herod tips his hand by treating the magi not as foreign dignitaries but as his own servants, whom he can send wherever he wants to do his bidding.

Everything about this story of the clash of kings is wrong. Wrong people. Wrong place. Wrong motives.

But that gives us a clue about the character of the new world God is creating. True power, God's creative power, will never be found in the place logic tells us to look, among the people logic tells us to expect.

This new realm that Jesus inaugurates will always be found among the least likely people in the most outrageous places. People and places no intelligent, successful, influential folks would ever think to look.

God is not only willing but **determined** to do everything wrong.

But that's the **good** news of Epiphany for those of us who fear we aren't the **right** people to help usher in this new world: God doesn't need much.

Just a handful of despised servants and spies kicking about insignificant backwaters trying to find Jesus and the way home.

—Amen.