

Born to be King

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What does it mean, “Born to be King?” Some of us are caught up watching the goings and comings of the British Monarchy. We watch with interest as Prince William and Princess Kate welcome the royal children. (I must have clicked on an article once because I am reminded daily about how cute Princess Charlotte is, or how big the new baby is.) Any careful watcher of the British monarchy knows that each member of the family has a claim to the crown based on birth order. For the British today, the only qualification you need to have this title is a bloodline. While the British monarchs in the modern era have little impact in the actual rule of the British empire, they at one time claimed power by Divine Right, as monarchs chosen by God to rule.

Monarchical rule is part of our historical reality. It was the primary form of government in the ancient world. The rulership was based on lineage and/or political prowess. In other words, if your army was big enough and your friends powerful enough, you might just be able to overthrow the government and establish your own kingdom. In the ancient world during the time of Jesus, there was a series of power struggles over who had the right to rule and political might, rule by force became the norm.

Matthew, our author, brings us the birth of Jesus in the middle of this power play in the ancient world. On the one hand, we have the Judean King, Herod the Great, who had inherited the throne from his father. Herod was a master builder, threw lavish parties, dressed in the finest and all the trappings of a king. While he had the influence from his father who had gained favor from Caesar Augustus.¹ He was forceful and feared. Herod was the king!

Meanwhile, the Christ child is born in a stable to poor, humble parents in the worst of circumstances. Kings and Queens are not born in stables, wrapped in rags and visited by shepherds. But God stepping into history had a very different

¹ Norman Gelb, *Herod the Great: Statesman, Visionary, Tyrant* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 14

plan for what it means to be “born a king.” Jesus came into the world not wearing a purple robe. He was not born in a glorious palace. He did not have a host of servants at his birth. His birth, for all practical reasons, was unremarkable. It was forgettable.

Yet, Matthew tells us the story, of Jesus Christ, “born to be king.”² Why would Herod who has so much power, fear this little baby so much that he instituted a reign of terror? How does that make sense when the Roman Empire views Herod as King, when the influential Sadducees recognized Herod as king? The problem is, of course, that the Jews, did not fully accept Herod as king. Why? Herod was of Arab descent, his father stole the throne from a rightful heir, and he was Jewish only because his grandfather had converted to the faith.³ His claim to the throne of Judea was out of desire for power and wealth. Herod was a usurper to the throne, he did not have the lineage, he was not “born to be king.”

So here is this baby, seemingly such an unlikely candidate for kingship. To reflect, for gospel writers Mark and Luke, this part of his story did not matter, but for Matthew, it was. It was important for his audience to understand how God scripted the human story and implanted Jesus, the son, into it. This baby was special, his place in the world was intentional, and his birth was prophesied. He was not a usurper to any throne but the promised king, one who had the lineage and one who would have the power; although, as we know, not of this world.

And here is Matthew telling this story, this story of the King of Kings, the story of the prince of peace. The story of God who truths lie in love, and grace and justice. The God who frees us from the sins of the world. When Matthew wrote his gospel nearly eighty years after the birth of Jesus Christ, the memory of Jesus’ life was held by disciples who were out telling the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection amidst persecution from the Roman Empire. It was not an easy time to be Christian. Matthew, who told the story of Christ to Jews, was talking with folks who had just watched their temple destroyed, had fought in brutal wars with the Romans, and mourned their loss of political independence. They were living in an era of hopelessness, and they did not understand who Christ was, is and will be. Matthew is writing this message of Good News to

²Richard B. Hays *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 94.

³Gelb., xvi.

introduce them to Jesus Christ, to remind them that this is one promised in their scriptures, that this is the Savior of the World. These people had hit bottom. But, Matthew's telling of this story at this time reminded them that they were the "chosen ones," the instruments of God to usher in the kingdom of Christ.

But what about us, does Matthew's account of Jesus Christ have any meaning for us today? Is it significant that Jesus was "born to be king?" The reality is that we live in a world that has kingdoms dominated by wealth and power, and that same ethos has come to permeate the actions of individuals. If we peruse the worlds' dictators, drug lords, and human trafficking bosses, we see the ever-present willingness to sacrifice the well-being of others for personal gain. Even well-meaning projects have the ulterior motive of power. On the international scene, China, for example, is known for its constant effort to build the biggest of everything: The biggest city, the biggest telescope, the largest 3D printed building. While perhaps interesting feats of human engineering, the underlying purpose of these is political prestige and a display of wealth. It is a mark of bettering your neighbor. Likewise, the Olympic Games, despite its claim of friendly international athletic competition, has an underlying competition of a world power-play as marked by a Russian team caught breaking Olympic doping rules to win. Here at home, families are cheating to help their children get into prestigious colleges. Youngsters are given the message that winning is more important than participating. The reality is that we live a society where the values of wealth and power are more important than helping our neighbor.

And here we are, at church, trying to understand what is the significance of Christmas for us? Here we are celebrating the birth of a baby that was anything but the mark of wealth and power. Here we are trying to make sense of a savior whose guiding principles are love for neighbor, self-sacrifice and overwhelming kindness. What are we missing in our day to day lives that leads us to seek this humble baby? Perhaps, we are too caught up in the ritual of the power kingdom. We come seeking answers to that world of wealth and power that we cannot answer.

Let us turn back to the Matthew, he tells this story in the midst of political, social and religious chaos. He tells this story, when all is lost, about the baby who is protected by God, about

the baby that came into history, “Born to be King.” For us Matthew’s account of the journey into Egypt reminds us that: First, God is walking with us on a journey. That God is the creator of the world and has worked in and through our history. This account reminds us of the words of the prophets that foresaw the birth of Jesus Christ and the chosen people who carried God’s story to this point in time. Second, this story reminds us that God protects us. As the angel of the Lord guided Joseph, so too does God guide us. Third, this account reminds us that despite the noise of our secular world, God is there.

Friends, it is easy to lose sight of God when we look at the world around us. But, no matter how loud it gets, God is there in the living presence of Jesus Christ. When all seems dark, Jesus is “the way, the truth and life.”⁴ Our gospel writer Matthew has come to tell us this good news about the baby, born to be king – the Kings of Kings, the Light of the World.

⁴John 14:6