

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

**Brentwood Presbyterian Church
January 26, 2014**

The Light of a King

**Matthew 2:1-3 & Psalm 27:1 & 4-9
(176, 161, 344, 612)**

This is a text about power.

It's about the power of might,
the power of knowledge,
and the power that really attracts.

Herod has the power of might – sort of.
The wise men have the power of knowledge – in a way.
And Jesus, new-born babe that he is, has the power to attract.

The first power – might – is threatened by the last power – to attract.
The second power – knowledge – can figure out what to accept –
the attraction of Jesus -
and what to reject – the might that is threatened by Jesus.

Let's dig into these ideas a bit deeper.

Power is one of God's great gifts to humanity.
We have the freedom to make things happen.
We can act in order to produce an effect.
We can produce a product.
We can generate a result.
We have the capacity to perform.
We can compose the future.

This is an awesome power.

It can be and has been used for much good – and for much evil.

In the end, we are responsible for its use.
That is how God fashioned us.
Each of us, and all of us together,
have the power to use our knowledge to choose
the ways we use the powers God gave us.

Herod the Great,
who was elected 'King of the Jews' by the Roman Senate in 39BC,
after much rivalry and intrigue.

He was ruthless in his desperation to hold onto power.
The order to kill all boys under the age of two in the nation
that followed this visit from the wise men
was just the culmination of a reign of terror
in which family members, including his wife and son,
were executed at his command.

This kind of manipulative and ruthless exercise of power
is a great temptation for human beings.

Whether it comes in the form
of domestic violence,
of bullying,
of workplace harassment,
of authorized brutality,
of military aggression,
of terrorist attack,
or of repressive response,
it all boils down to using our power to crush others.

The world is too easily divided into the good guys and the bad guys
and we give ourselves permission to eliminate the bad guys,
often invoking God's will as our reason.

This kind of power is fueled by fear.
The false strategy we often use to deal with fear
is to try and completely control the situation
for what we consider to be our benefit.
We adopt a 'might is right' strategy.
And it often works –
for the moment, for a while.
But the source of the fear usually returns,
either in its old form or in new forms.
What we really have to do
is deal with the fear itself.
And that happens only
when we consent to letting the attraction of God
shape our knowledge.

That's what I think is happening in this short passage in Matthew.
The power of ruthless might is demanding
that the power of knowledge serve it.

But the power of God's attracting love
is more persuasive
and leads knowledge in a different direction,
out of danger and into blessing.

But the power of knowledge can be tricky.
After all, it was the lure of that power
that formed the central image of the story of the Fall in Genesis.
God warned against eating from the tree
of the knowledge of good and evil.
I don't pretend yet to have mad sense of that story.
It's rich and multi-layered in its significance.
But I think it has something to do
with how we use the power to know.
Do we use it in companionship and service with God,
or do we use it simply to satisfy our own needs
by seeking selfish security, affection, and power?

God made us with those basic needs –
security, affection, and power.
But how they are satisfied determines so much.
Satisfy them in companionship and service with God,
and you will flourish.
Satisfy them in companionship and service to fear,
and you will wither to the point of death,
and take a lot of others with you.

I think that's what the renewal of the Covenant at Moab,
just before the people of the Exodus enter into the promised land,
recorded in the last chapters of Deuteronomy,
is getting at.
God, we are assured, delights in our prosperity.
That prosperity comes from choosing God's ways of using power.
The choice is stark.

*"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today
That I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.
Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,
loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him,
for that means life to you
(Deut 30:19-20a)*

Loving, obeying, and holding fast to God
is the use of our power that we sense and see clearly in Jesus.

The wise men sensed it and it drew them to see its source.

Herod sensed it and tried desperately to eradicate it -
and failed.

We can sense it and see it
much more fully developed
than either Herod or the wise men,
but we continue to be faced with the Deuteronomic choice
in the way we accept God's gift of power –
life or death, blessings or curses.

The power we see in Jesus, the Christ,
is the power of God's love.

It's attraction comes from the many and marvelous ways
it satisfies our most basic needs
for security, affection, and power.
That satisfaction comes only in companionship with God.
Nothing else in all creation
can create the deep and lasting satisfaction for the needs.
Not might, not knowledge, not human relationships alone,
not substances that rev us up or numb us down.
Only coming home to where we are meant to be,
where we are nourished to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ,
will meet those basic needs in a deeply satisfying way.

That's what we strive to do here at Brentwood.
By God's grace and in companionship with God in Christ and the Holy Spirit,
we create the spiritual and physical space
for people to be encountered by the power of God's love,
to be transformed by that power,
and to grow into Christian maturity in the use of that power
for life and blessing in the world.

We will be looking seriously this year
at ways of enhancing that space
and increasing that growth
here at Brentwood.
It will involve risk and change.
But that risk and change is worth it
if we can serve God by offering a community
in which people can find life and blessing.

And it will all be guided by the attractive power of the love of God.