

What's so Important About the Birth of a King? Matthew 2:1-12

〈 Introduction 〉

At my current workplace, the Tokyo Marunouchi Partnership, we have a cafe that is a shared space that people from other companies can use. In that cafe, there is a novel I particularly enjoy called *The Little Prince* displayed conspicuously.

The story of *The Little Prince* has quite a few things in common with the story of the Bible. For example, the prince visits earth from his home planet, and Jesus comes to earth from the Kingdom of Heaven. Both stories have the element of coming from another land.

There is a famous line in *The Little Prince*, "...what is essential is invisible to the eye."

There are two kings depicted in the passage we'll read today. One is Herod the Great, who reigned in a way that, 'to the eye,' it was obvious he was a king. The second king is Jesus Christ, who was born King of the Jews in such a way that his kingship is not evident to us at first glance. These two kings exist in stark contrast to each other.

Another contrast that can be clearly seen in today's passage is between those who are driven by invisible powers in the world, and those who have hope and joy in the unseen.

These contrasts are the same for us today. 'To the eye,' the leader of our nation is the prime minister, but Christians have an unseen King, in whom we can have hope and joy.

With these points in mind, let's listen to today's passage, Matthew 2:1-12. I will read it aloud.

〈 Bible Reading 〉 Matthew 2:1-12

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,

²saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.

⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

〈Main Points〉

1. The birth of a king changes people's lives

At the time this passage was written, the birth of a new king was called a 'gospel,' or 'good news.' This was because such an event would completely change people's daily lives. However, whether or not the birth of a king was 'good' news, depended on your relationship with that king. If you were a supporter of the new king, it would be good, life-changing news. On the other hand, if you were an opponent of the new king, the future awaiting you was not good at all, with the potential to lose your home, your position, and maybe even your head. In those days, the birth of a king was an event that completely changed the lives of the people.

In fact, when the first Roman emperor, Augustus, ascended to power, Herod got his position as the king of the Jews by supporting Augustus. Herod wasn't ethnically Jewish, but was from the land of Edom in the south of Israel, and yet he was appointed as the king of the Jews. The ascension of Augustus was good news for Herod.

But then Herod received news that another king of the Jews had been born. Wise men from other nations came to him and said this in verse 2.

2 "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

If there was a new king in Judea, Herod's own position and authority would be in danger, so he was troubled. The birth of a king has the power to shake up a person's life, for better or worse.

2. We are under the influence of those to whom we belong

If you look at verse 3, it says that along with Herod, all the people in Jerusalem were troubled as well.

¹⁰ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

The people of Jerusalem had been betrayed many times by rumors that the Messiah had come. Each time, they witnessed Herod's brutal response, so, frankly, they didn't want to get wrapped up in any of those kinds of things. In fact, after this episode, Herod went on to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

We live our lives under the influence of those in power. What kind of power exerts its influence on us depends on whose rule we belong to. For the people of Jerusalem, the invisible power of Herod's rule stirred up unrest and fear.

Quite a while ago, there was a drama on Fuji TV called 'Team Medical Dragon.' The drama took place against the backdrop of a hospital full of organizational problems like power struggles and cover-ups for medical mistakes. Under that influence, the hospital staff experienced a lot of strife. For example, if you got on the bad side of the hospital

director, you would be transferred to a rural area, so the staff did everything they could to be liked by the director who held so much power over them.

At one point in the drama, a female doctor with a strong sense of justice tried to change the hospital's disreputable culture, but she herself became tainted with the hospital's corrupt values, vying to get ahead, and in the end was unable to stand up against those in power.

We live our lives under the influence of unseen forces. If we belong to a corrupt organization, we will experience significant amounts of pressure. And it's not just corporations, but countries, too, seek to move us with their authority and rule.

At first, the people of Jerusalem were eagerly awaiting the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. But the invisible power of Herod's rule stirred up fear amongst them.

And that invisible power was not limited to Herod, the ruler of Judea, for the people of Jerusalem were also under the rule of the Roman Empire. If there was an uprising in Judea, Rome would send its armies to suppress it without mercy. In the face of that kind of ruling power, it's no wonder they lived in such fear.

There are invisible powers that seek to manipulate us.

3. The hope and joy that come when Jesus is your king

However, the passage we read today talks about people who were not influenced by those forces. The wise men from the east are rather inconspicuous characters, but they rejoice at the birth of the Messiah. Verses 9 and 10 say this.

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

This passage doesn't tell us how many wise men there were, or which countries they came from. But they came to worship the new king after his birth. Why on earth would these wise men find it worthwhile to come and worship the king of the Jews? Judea was an incredibly small country, and Judaism was not their religion, so why would they rejoice at the birth of a Jewish king? It was a long and dangerous journey, why would they take such a risk?

This is because they recognized that Jesus was not just King of the Jews, but also King of the whole world. At that time, there were rumors spreading in the surrounding nations that a king would be born in the land of Judea who would rule over the whole world. If they were supporters of this new King Jesus, his birth would be good news, a gospel, to them. He is king over everyone, and he is their king, too.

Although, in contrast to this, the four gospels do emphasize the point that Jesus came as King of the Jews, specifically. Verse 6 says that a ruler will arise to be a shepherd to Israel.

6 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.'

Also, when the Roman governor, Pilate, asked Jesus 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus responded 'You have said so.' Indeed, Jesus came as King of the Jews.

However, through his death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the ruler of this world, Satan, and through that victory became king of the world. His reign began when he ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of God, and he still rules today through his Spirit. Being both King of the Jews and King of the whole world means that not just the people of Israel, but people from every nation can become the people of God.

The wise men from the east came from afar to celebrate the birth of the King of the world, and in this, they found hope and joy. The birth of this King Jesus is good news that frees his supporters from the bondage of unseen powers, and brings hope and joy to their lives.

〈Application〉

The place we live today is also driven by unseen powers. Covid-19 and its effects continue to be in the news, stirring up our anxiety. We are often anxious about our lives and our jobs. However, in the midst of it all, the gospel is good news that brings us hope and joy.

Are we standing in support of Jesus as King? Have we welcomed Jesus as our King in our own hearts?

There is a pastor in America named James Bryan Smith. After getting married, his wife became pregnant, but in the eighth month of the pregnancy, they found out the baby girl had a chromosomal abnormality, and the doctor told them she would die soon after birth. After his daughter's birth, she lived for about two years and then passed away.

I can't imagine the grief and loss they experienced. As he looked back on the experience, the pastor said that no matter what manner of encouragement he received from those around him, instead of feeling encouraged, he just felt more and more angry.

But still, he chose to put his focus on Jesus. Jesus lives in our hearts and rules over us through his Holy Spirit.

At one point, Pastor James quieted his heart and prayed, "God, wouldn't it have been better if my daughter had never been born?" He honestly confronted God and expressed his anger. And God spoke to him. He showed her that if she had never been born, she would not be in the Kingdom of Heaven, that she experienced many happy things during her short time on earth, and that even though there are times of terrible sorrow in this world, those sorrows will eventually fade away and be replaced by perfect joy.

Pastor James bowed down in repentance, wept, and gave thanks to God.

We may experience tragedy, however we can take comfort and experience hope and joy in the midst of it because we have a God who is reigning over the world.

Two years after that experience, God gave Pastor James and his wife another daughter.

The gospel is that Jesus the King came to earth. We ought to turn our hearts to the King, who reigns over us.

Even though there are times when it seems impossible to find hope and joy, it is King Jesus himself who gives these things. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus as we go into this week.

⟨Prayer⟩

Heavenly Father,

We praise you for giving us your Son, Jesus Christ.

There are just over 10 days until Christmas, and we look forward to that day with joy. We are excited to celebrate your birth.

Right now, there are many unseen powers that try to stir up fear and anxiety in our hearts.

As we go through this week, help us to rely on you, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. As your people, many we find our hope and joy in you.

We pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
Amen.