

“Disturbing the Status Quo”

Matthew 2:1-12

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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'Twas the night before Christmas, when all thro' the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar plums danced in their heads;
And Mama in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap—

I'm sure you recognize these opening lines from the poem, "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," published anonymously in the Troy, New York *Sentinel* on December 23, 1823. Do you recall the lines that immediately follow?

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.

Whoever wrote this poem—and there's quite a lively debate concerning the matter¹—the author, perhaps unwittingly, revealed something about Christmas that we usually overlook. *When Christmas comes, it disturbs the status quo.*

In the beloved poem, the man had just settled his brain for a long winter's nap, when without warning, his peaceful night's sleep was disturbed by the noisy arrival of St. Nicholas, his sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer. Similarly, in the Gospel of Matthew's account of the Christmas story, the announcement of Jesus' birth shattered King Herod's peace of mind. Let's review the story.

Depending on when one dates the birth of Jesus,² Herod the Great, King of the Jews, was enjoying the lavish fruits of his long, thirty-plus-year reign. Herod was staunchly pro-Roman in his political leanings which ensured that he had the unequalled military might of Rome behind him as their loyal client king of the troublesome province located on the edge of the Roman Empire. Yes, from Herod's perspective, he had the world on a string. He was in complete control and was confident that everything would continue to turn out in his favor.

Then out of the blue one day, a group of magi arrived at Herod's palace seeking an audience with him. The magi were most likely Persian priests of Zoroastrianism who studied the planets and stars and were well known in the ancient world for the practice of astrology.³ Their study of what we today might call comparative religions, and their study of the stars, led them to believe that an unusual heavenly phenomenon they had observed heralded the special

birth of someone who was destined to be the King of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah. So logically, they traveled to the palace in Jerusalem, seeking to pay homage to the special child.

The arrival of the scholarly magi from the East greatly upset the paranoid Herod, for the news they brought threatened the status quo. Herod was zealous in his efforts to safeguard his place of privilege and power. Not only did he employ secret police to spy on his subjects; he also occasionally slipped out of the palace in disguise so he could spy for himself, just in case his secret police were lying to him. He trusted no one. Why, Herod was so paranoid that several times he executed members of his immediate family when it appeared—or was simply rumored—that they posed a threat to his throne. Disturbing Herod's status quo was a dangerous thing to do. That's why after the Gospel of Matthew records the words, "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened," the Evangelist added the telling words, "and all Jerusalem with him." When the status quo was threatened, who knew what Herod might do? All Jerusalem trembled in fear.

Herod quickly called together the religious leaders of Judaism to ascertain where the long-awaited Messiah was to be born. They responded that according to the Prophet Micah, the village of Bethlehem would be his birth place. Then, the calculating Herod devised two bloody plans. His primary plan, Plan A, was to send the magi to Bethlehem in search of the child and have them report back to him under the pretext that he, too, wanted to pay homage to the child. Of course, what Herod really intended to do was kill the child.

Never one to put all his eggs in one basket, Herod also devised a backup plan, Plan B. So as not to arouse suspicion, he casually asked the magi when they had first seen the star, and learned that it had appeared two years earlier. Therefore, the backup plan was that if the magi did not find the child, or if they failed to report back to Herod after finding him, Herod would simply kill all the male children in Bethlehem two years old and younger.

You know the rest of the story. The magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and Joseph was warned in a dream to take his little family and flee to Egypt, where they remained until after Herod's death.

Perhaps you have heard that we do not have independent historical evidence for the Slaughter of the Innocents in Bethlehem. That is true, but not surprising. After all, Bethlehem was quite a small village at the time. The murder of ten or at the most twenty babies would hardly be likely to come to the attention of the Jewish or Roman historians of the day. Why, think of how many children are killed in Syria each week yet seldom do their deaths make the evening news broadcasts.

But historians do know a great deal about Herod's long reign, and what they know beyond doubt is that he would do anything—yes, even murder innocent children—to maintain the status quo. Herod could only view the magi's news as disturbing. In fact, he probably found it disturbing on two levels.

Obviously, the announcement of the birth of the Messiah, the King of the Jews, threatened Herod's throne and the royal dynasty he intended to establish: a Herodian dynasty. *Herod* was King of the Jews, and he wanted one of his *sons* to inherit this title after him. Therefore, this child born in Bethlehem could only be viewed as an *usurper*.

But the magi's announcement disturbed the status quo on an even deeper level, one that, sadly, is still relevant today. Listen again to the words of the Prophet Micah: "from [Bethlehem] shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." Who is to *shepherd* my people. God's will for Israel's rulers was that they would act as shepherds, that they would treat the people the way shepherds treat their sheep. They would care for them, protect them, feed them, know them by name, and even lay down their lives for them. Seldom had this been the case in Israel's history, but Micah proclaimed that the long-awaited Messiah *would* shepherd God's people.

Herod's reign over Judea was a far cry from the care of a shepherd for his sheep. The same can be said of Rome's rule over much of the then-known world. Indeed, the same can be said for nearly all political leaders throughout history. Leaders have rarely even attempted to assume the role of "shepherd of the people."

Yes, the magi's news disturbed the status quo in Herod's day; and sadly, it continues to disturb the status quo—even today. Whenever the true meaning of Christmas is understood, it disturbs the status quo. We may not be in positions of political or government leadership, but that does not mean that the message of Christmas does not disturb our status quo. It does. And that's good; disturbing the status quo is a manifestation of God's grace toward us. It reminds us that we can never rest, can never accept the status quo, as long as—to quote the poet Longfellow—"There is no peace on earth, . . . for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men."⁴ But the perceptive Longfellow did not conclude his poem-turned-Christmas-carol on that sad note. Out of his deep faith, he continued: "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth he sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men.'"

And that's the true message of Christmas—the status quo disturbing, tyrant troubling, empire embarrassing, prophetic proclamation of one who was born to shepherd God's people.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ Authorship has been attributed to Professor Clement Clark Moore and to Major Henry Livingston, Jr.

² Scholars agree that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 BCE. Thus, our calendar is off by between six and four years.

³ Although a few scholars have argued that the magi were great sages of India, most have seen them as originating in the Parthian Empire, which bordered the Roman Empire on the east.

⁴ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," *Favorite Hymns*, (Tabernacle Publishing, 1967) Hymn 91.