

Introduction

Empire of Spectacle vs. the Quiet, Cross-Shaped Kingdom

Matthew 2:1–3; Luke 4:16–21; Mark 10:42–45; John 18:36–37 (NIV)

Opener: Living in Spectacle

Everywhere we turn, something is trying to dazzle us.

Screens flash, notifications ping, headlines shout. There are halftime shows, political rallies, viral videos, and endless scrolls of curated images. Our world has learned how to package power, beauty, and success in a way that's loud, bright, and hard to ignore.

And if we're honest, it works.

Something in us is drawn to the big, the visible, the impressive. We are tempted to believe that what really matters is what everyone can see.

The world of the New Testament was well aware of this. There was a man named **Herod the Great** who understood the power of spectacle. He built palaces, fortresses, stadiums, and ports. He knew how to impress Rome. He knew how to dazzle crowds. He knew how to make people feel small in his shadow.

Yet into that landscape, God sends another King.

Not in a palace, but in a village.

Not with armies, but with a manger.

Not with a parade of power, but with a life of suffering love.

Tonight, two kingdoms stand side by side:

- **Herod's empire of spectacle**—anxious, loud, and self-protective.
- **Jesus' quiet, cross-shaped kingdom**—often hidden, often small, but filled with holy love.

The question before us is simple and searching: **Which kingdom is shaping us?**

Herod's Empire of Spectacle (Matthew 2:1–3)

Matthew sets the scene:

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem” (Matt 2:1). They ask, **“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”** (2:2). Matthew continues:

“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt 2:3).

Herod is “king,” but only because Rome says so. His throne rests on Caesar's favor, not on God's promise. His position is precarious, and he knows it.

So he builds.

- He raises **Herodium**, an artificial mountain crowned with a palace—his monument to self.
- He expands the Temple in Jerusalem, not only as an act of piety but as a statement of power.
- He constructs **Caesarea Maritima**, a glittering port city with harbor, theater, and arena—all to honor Caesar and showcase his greatness.¹

If one stood in Herod's world, everything would be designed to impress: high walls, gleaming stone, water flowing in the desert. The architecture is a sermon: *Look at what Herod has done. Look how secure you are under his rule.*

Yet under all that stone lies **fear**... The moment he hears of another “king of the Jews,” he is disturbed. The city trembles with him. An anxious ruler creates an anxious system; Herod's internal panic becomes the emotional climate of Jerusalem.²

Herod's kingdom runs on three fuels:

1. **Spectacle** – big, visible displays that capture attention.
2. **Control** – schemes, alliances, and violence to hold power.
3. **Fear** – of losing status, of rivals, of any challenge to his story.

That is ancient history, but it is also a mirror.

We know this pattern:

- Leaders who appear strong but are driven by insecurity.
- Systems—families, workplaces, even churches—where everyone manages the emotions of one anxious person at the top.
- Lives built on managing appearances more than trusting God.

Herod shows what happens when fear is allowed to build a life: the outside becomes larger and louder, while the inside grows smaller and more afraid.

Jesus' Quiet Kingdom (Luke 4:16–21; John 1:46)

While Herod builds monuments, God is at work in places Herod barely notices.

Jesus grows up in **Nazareth**, a village in Galilee. When Nathanael hears about him, he asks, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46). Nazareth is not on anyone's list of important places. It is away from the temple, away from the palaces, away from the known centers of power.

¹ Cyndi Parker, *Encountering Jesus in the Real World of the Gospels* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2020), 77–82.

² Also see Addendum: Fear at the end of this paper. Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 364–370.

The **Jezreel and Herod Valleys** are described as crossroads where armies and traders pass, yet God often locates his work in the small towns and villages scattered around those routes.³ In a world obsessed with centers, God keeps appearing where no one expects him.

Luke tells us that Jesus returns to Nazareth:

“He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue” (Luke 4:16).

Jesus reads from Isaiah:

- Good news to the poor.
- Freedom for prisoners.
- Recovery of sight for the blind.
- Release for the oppressed.
- The year of the Lord’s favor (4:18–19).

And then he says, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* (4:21).

No palace. No parade. No stadium. Just a village synagogue, a scroll, and the quiet announcement that God’s kingdom is breaking in for the people everyone else overlooks.

When we say Jesus’ kingdom comes “from the margins,” it does not mean he is forever stuck at the edge of history. He is the center of Israel’s story, the promised King who fulfills the Torah, the temple, and the prophets.⁴ But God chooses to begin his royal announcement in places the powerful dismiss—Nazareth, Galilee, tables with tax collectors and sinners, among the poor, the sick, the outcast.

The point is not that the “margins” are automatically better; the point is that **Jesus’ kingdom does not depend on spectacle, status, or visibility**. It moves quietly in ordinary places with a different kind of power: the power of holy love.

Think of what that looks like in everyday life:

- A caregiver who shows up day after day for a spouse with dementia.
- A grandparent who prays faithfully for children and grandchildren.
- A small congregation that serves its neighborhood without headlines or applause.

Herod’s world would barely notice any of that. Yet heaven sees it clearly.

In the Friends tradition, holiness is not about spiritual showmanship; it is about intimacy with the living God that transforms ordinary life for the sake of the world.⁵ That is the quiet kingdom at work.

³ Cyndi Parker, *Listen to the Land: Jezreel and Herod Valleys* (course lecture, Jerusalem University College, n.d.).

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 204–212.

⁵ Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 7–9.

The Clash: Spectacle vs. Servanthood (Mark 10:42–45; John 18:36–37)

Eventually, these two visions of greatness collide.

Even Jesus' disciples struggle. James and John ask for seats of honor—one at his right and one at his left in glory. They are still thinking in Herod's categories: position, visibility, status.

Jesus calls them together:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:42–43).

Then he gives the pattern: “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45).

- Herod's greatness is measured by how many people serve him.
- Jesus' greatness is measured by how far he will go to serve others.
- Herod secures his throne by shedding others' blood.
- Jesus brings his kingdom by shedding his own.

N. T. Wright notes that Jesus takes Israel's hopes for a king and turns them inside out: the Messiah wins not by crushing enemies with the sword, but by bearing sin and evil in his own body on the cross.⁶

Standing before Pilate, Jesus says: “***My kingdom is not of this world***” (John 18:36).

He does not mean his kingdom has nothing to do with this world. He means it does not run on the world's fuel. It does not advance by spectacle, domination, or fear. It moves in truth, love, and obedient surrender to the Father.

If one walks through Israel today, Herod's palaces and fortresses remain as ruins and tourist sites. The empire of spectacle has become a history lesson. But the quiet kingdom Jesus planted has grown into a worldwide people: believers, gathered in homes and churches and meetings, bearing witness to the same crucified and risen Lord.

- Herod's kingdom built dead stones.
- Jesus' kingdom builds living ones.

How This Word Addresses Us

These are not just ancient stories. The same two kingdoms still compete for our hearts and for our churches.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 127–133.

Personally – Where Does Herod Live in Me?

Herod's story tells us:

- “You are what you can make people see.”
- “You are as secure as your image.”
- “You cannot afford to be weak.”

So, we learn to armor up: we enhance our image management, strive for perfectionism, and maintain control. That “armor” is our attempt to avoid being seen as weak or vulnerable.⁷ **It is Herod's fear in modern form.**

Jesus' kingdom tells a different story:

- “You are loved before you perform.”
- “You are known in your weakness.”
- “You are invited into a life that may look small, but is anchored in God.”

So, a few questions help us discern:

- Where am I chasing impressive rather than faithful?
- Where am I measuring my worth by visibility rather than obedience?
- Where is Jesus inviting me to lay down the armor of spectacle and pick up the towel of servanthood?

One way to begin is simple: practice **HIDDEN OBEDIENCE**. Choose one act of service this week that no one knows about: **Pray for someone in secret. Give quietly. Encourage someone without wanting anything in return. Let it be between you and the Lord.**

We talk about living from the “Divine Center,” where outward compulsions no longer drive life, but by a deep, inner awareness of God's presence does.⁸ That is what disarms Herod-like Hellenism inside us.

As a Church – What Kind of Community Will We Be?

This is also a word for the church: Congregations can be tempted by spectacle too, always needing something new, bigger, flashier, more “successful” than the church down the road. None of those things is evil by itself. But we need to be careful, so that they don't become our Herodium, our monument to us.

Our Faith Walk (tradition) reminds us that holiness is communal —→ not just a personal experience. We are called to be a people of **faithful presence**: a calm, steady, Christ-centered community in an anxious world.⁹ The healing power of non-anxious presence in a system is

⁷ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 75–90.

⁸ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 3–24.

⁹ Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*, 217–220.

rooted in our trust in Jesus: with Him we are a people who stay connected, clear-minded, and grounded, rather than reactive.¹⁰

In a Herod world, the church has a choice:

- Mirror the culture's anxiety and spectacle.
- Or embody the quiet, cross-shaped kingdom of Jesus: honoring the weak, welcoming the outsider, lowering the temperature, and bearing witness to hope.

Conclusion – Choosing a Kingdom

Imagine two scenes.

On one side, Herod's world: fortresses on hills, stone gleaming in the sun, soldiers at attention, banners snapping in the wind. It is impressive. It promises safety and status. And today, it lies in ruins.

On the other side, Jesus' kingdom: no palace, just a table where sinners and tax collectors sit with a rabbi who washes their feet. A cross outside the city where Rome believes it has won. And a small group of disciples who will carry good news to the ends of the earth.

One kingdom demands that life be impressive now.

The other invites a life that may look small, but is filled with resurrection power.

So the question is not only, "Do we believe in Jesus?" The question is: **Which kingdom will shape our choices this week?**

Pray with me: Lord, lead us away from spectacle and into servanthood, away from fear and into trust, away from anxious control and into faithful presence: so that our life together points, not to Herod's passing glory, but to the living Lord who still builds his kingdom in ordinary places, among ordinary people, by extraordinary grace.

Amen.

Let's take a moment or two and center on who we are in the Kingdom... Now and the Kingdom Not Yet.

¹⁰ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985), 13–33.

Addendum: Fear

When describing fear, we need to bring it back to the concept of Family Systems. This offers a recognizable description: fear, in this sense, is what happens in people and families with a very low tolerance for anxiety.¹¹ This is what we mean:

1. **They fear anxiety itself.**

Those with a low tolerance for anxiety are afraid of feeling anxious, so they pull back from any situation that might stir it up. They do not simply dislike anxiety; they treat it as something dangerous that must be avoided at all costs.

2. **“Peace at any price.”**

Because they fear anxiety so much, they will quickly compromise important life principles just to quiet things down in the moment. This is a “peace at any price” policy. It reduces tension in the short term but produces more anxiety later, because nothing real is resolved.

3. **Fear makes relationships rigid and inhibited.**

The fear of stirring up anxiety begins to inhibit every relationship. Parents are afraid to be spontaneous with each other in case they “hurt” the other. They are terrified to relate directly to the identified patient, convinced they will make things worse. The system becomes cautious, constricted, and avoidant.

4. **Therapist stance: anxiety is inevitable and survivable.**

We must not join the fear of anxiety. Instead, take a calm, differentiated stance:

- Anxiety is inevitable if we actually address problems.
- When anxiety rises, the real choice is to retreat or to go forward anyway.
- Anxiety can make people shaky, sleepless, or symptomatic, but it will not kill them, and people can grow more mature by facing it.

5. **From “helpless” to responsible action.**

These families are not truly helpless; they are functionally helpless because fear of anxiety keeps them from acting on their own convictions. As even one person in the family begins to tolerate more anxiety and act from a clearer sense of self, the system can shift from a floundering, anxiety-ridden unit to a more resourceful one.

In short:

- Fear, in this sense, is essentially dread of anxiety and disturbance.
- Families treat anxiety as dangerous, avoid it at all costs, and become stuck in rigid patterns.
- Healthy functioning requires reframing anxiety as inevitable, survivable, and even growth-producing when it is faced with courage and clarity.

This also sharpens the “Herod vs. cross-shaped kingdom” contrast: **Herod’s world operates on the fear of disturbance and prioritizes peace at any price**, even if it costs truth and integrity. **Jesus’ kingdom walks straight into anxiety and suffering, trusting the Father and growing people through it, not around it.** The cross is not the avoidance of anxiety but its faithful bearing in love.

¹¹ Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 364–70

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