

“Three Kings”

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Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA

Christmas 2 – January 4, 2026

Matthew 2:1-12

Today we hear a tale of three very different kings.

The tale is set in the time of the first king, King Herod, the king of a people who are oppressed by the empire of Rome.

Herod is a frightened king. Fear itself is natural and even healthy. But a king acting out of fear, indeed ruled by fear, that is a dangerous thing. When three strangers from the East come looking for a special baby king, his fear takes over. Herod is a king who knows he is not the Messiah because he asks where the Messiah is to be born. He doesn't know the prophesies himself; but he gathers chief priests and scribes who do. Bethlehem, birthplace of King David. Fear grows.

Herod is a king who holds secret meetings, calling in the visitors from the East and attempting to deceive and manipulate them to find the special baby king and let him know where he is, pretending that he will also go and pay him homage.

Herod is a king of this world, a petty tyrant seeking his own good rather than that of his people.

A king who rules and is ruled by his fear and anger and desire for power.

A king who is remembered not because he used his power for the good of his people but for the destruction he caused and the people he harmed.

Herod was a king who chose fear.

The second king of the story is a group of travelers who are probably not kings at all but wise men. They are Magi, astrologers, philosophers, scholars, advisers.

We know so little about them and yet so much. They come from the East. They are Gentiles. They are men who look up, who watch the patterns of the stars, who notice the bright light and follow it. They know what it portends, and they endure much to travel far for a glimpse of the one it heralds. They have means, wealth for such travel and for extravagant gifts to share with the special baby king. They are not afraid to ask for directions when they get close.

Their arrival seeking the child who has been born king of the Jews ignites fear not only in King Herod but in the other elites of Jerusalem. A new king might be a threat to their own power but also a threat to the status quo – what might the Emperor do if word of a new king gets back to Rome?

We don't know exactly who these men from the east were, but we do know they were ruled by curiosity, endurance, wonder, and wisdom. They travel great distance at great expense, and when they find what they are looking for, the child heralded even by the stars, they feel joy. They worship, give gifts, perhaps gifts that will provide the means for the child's father to get him to safety when Herod's fear and wrath culminate in the slaughter of innocent children.

These wise ones continue to listen and watch even after they find the child, and they pay attention to the dream telling them to go home by a different way, a way that avoids further contact with the tyrant king, a way that prevents that fearful king from finding the baby king.

The third king in the story is the baby king, the Christ child, the Messiah.

The Word made flesh, Emmanuel, God with us.

King of kings and lord of lords. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

Jesus.

The third king isn't ruled by fear but by love.

The third king gives up power in order to be with his people.

The third king is the love of God enfleshed, living among us suffering among us, feasting among us, teaching and healing and praying and laughing and crying among us.

The third king is Jesus, the one we follow as Christians, our guiding star, our light in the darkness, our calm in the storm, our hope when it seems that all hope is gone. The one who commanded us to love one another as he loved us, the one who showed us how to do that by laying down his life.

When the kings and powers of this world nailed Jesus to the cross, they nailed love to the cross. And love looked back from the cross and said, you do not have power over me. As many times as you kill love, I will rise again.

Jesus was a king who chose love.

Friends, on this 4th day of a new year, this 11th Day of Christmas, two days before Epiphany, more than 2000 years after those wise ones came to worship the child king, we still come together to pray, sing, and worship. We express our love for God and we support each other in our journey in this life. We support each other in finding our way home.

I want to close with a final story. This one is about some books my children received for Christmas. They are from the Power to Choose series about Danny and Darla. The books are sort of like those Choose Your Own Adventure books that we had back in the 80's but instead the reader is asked, "What would Danny or Darla do?"

Now Danny and Darla have been given superhero capes and told that they have the superpower of being able to choose and what they choose will affect how the day goes. So you read along and perhaps Danny is coming downstair for breakfast when he sees that his brother is eating pancakes off his favorite plate. The reader gets to choose:

Should Danny yell at his brother and try to take the plate away?

Or should Danny say, "Oh well, I'll eat off that plate another day."

Depending on the answer, you turn to a different page. If you keep making "bad" decisions, eventually you get to an ending where Danny says, "This was the worst day ever!" and then wonders if it might have gone differently if he made a different choice. The reader can go back and choose differently to get a different outcome.

My friends, consider this a Christmas gift – I'm giving you a superhero cape because we too have the power to choose. What we choose will affect not only our day but how our lives go, and the lives of others around us. Look at how the different choices of the kings affected their lives and world. The difference between Herod and Jesus and the wise ones.

We get to choose whether we will be ruled by love or fear, by wonder and curiosity or judgment and arguing, by hope or despair. Who will we choose to follow?

Where will we choose to put our energy? Who will we listen to?

I invite us not to choose the loud, clanging voices of fear and anger and instead to listen for the movement of the Holy Spirit, for the love of God, for the inner wisdom and wonder and curiosity and to ground in those things.

We get to choose.

What we choose matters.

My friends, in this new year, how will we choose?