



“Battle of the Kings: Who Gets the Gifts”

Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby

Matthew 2:1-12

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Harry Potter warns of a person so evil that one must not say Voldemort, but “He who shall not be named.” And the character who is evil personified tries to kill the young child before he can grow strong, yet Harry becomes known as “the Boy who lived.” But we are going to get to stars, so if I knew it better I would use Star Wars as a comparison in this gospel battle between good and evil.

For the Gospel of Matthew begins with a battle of the kings. Magi, astrologers, fortune tellers, wise ones, engage in watching the stars and reflecting on sacred texts, think, learn, anticipate that a new king has been born.

This is not some Circle of Life moment in which the Lion King has proudly given birth to a new child and welcomes the news that a future king has been born.

These wise ones travel to the capitol city - to Jerusalem - and inquire of the old king where it is that this new king has been born. Old kings don't like this question. This one in particular.

And the battle of the kings has begun, even if only one knows it at the time. Two kings. Two ways of being. Two decidedly different ways of expressing power.

One is entrenched, powerful, and always looking out for new threats to his power. the other innocent, unexpected, vulnerable. The wise ones have started something that cannot be unsaid. The genie is out of the bottle, they have squeezed the tube of toothpaste and it is not going back in the tube. Their question about where is the new king has been asked, and the battle has begun.

So while they journey toward this child born to be king, the question in their minds and that we should wonder is: whose side are they on? Will they return to Herod? Will they betray the child?

There are two sets of gifts here: intelligence and then the symbolic gifts. When I say intelligence, I don't mean smarts. I use the word more like use of the word in the Central Intelligence Agency or CIA.

Information that supports or threatens the powers that be. Maybe not our pageant that was set in Nazi-occupied France, but most Christmas pageants focus not on the intelligence and the responsibility to use it wisely but on the symbolic gifts foreshadowed in Isaiah: (gold, frankincense, myrrh.)

Once they encounter this child born to be king, will they return to Herod as informants, or will they go home by a different way, buying the child and his parents time to seek protection?

We know how the beginning of the gospel goes. The wise ones - having not been so wise to ask the initial question, wise up and go home by a different road and leave Herod in the dark as to the details. As a result, Jesus is the boy who lives, and then grows strong and wise and brave.

But the story is really never over. As a different gospel [John] puts it, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5, NRSV). But perhaps a better translation, both for getting the Greek correctly into English and for expressing the theological reality John is trying to introduce, is that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

For there is still a struggle of goodness and evil in the world. Sometimes subtle. Oftentimes messy. Occasionally obvious and waged in full view. And in the midst of the battle, we are like the wise ones of this story. Blessed with gifts and stories. Having heard of a new king born, we must also decide who gets our gifts.

During Sunday School earlier this morning, kids say my tie with the wise men on camels following a star and asked, "Is today Star Day?"

Handing our Star Words - it's a practice I learned about from my friend Marci, who is just a fantastic pastor of a small but mighty church in Idaho. The gospel story tells of the magi navigating by stars toward Jesus. And so the thought is that we might select a word that will help us to navigate. This is the third year we will be doing this spiritual practice.

It might not be the word we think we need or want. It might make us go huh? Some words might make us mad. And some words from the moment we get them wow us.

Marci encourages people to take a star and then trust that the word they get is the word they need. She writes, "If they want to come up after worship and change out words, they can do that, but they can't just rifle through the pile while they are in line searching for some magic word. People tell me that after doing it a few years now, they really trust the process and have always learned the most from the words they like the least (initially)."

Words that might help us navigate, but they might also serve as a tool for meditation and reflection, about how our life matters, about how we use our gifts and who gets our best.

So, today is a big day at Central. We are ordaining and installing new ruling elders and deacons who will guide us. We hear once again of days of old, and how a

star guided wise men to Jesus. We will celebrate communion, a sign and seal of God's love for us. And then, I invite you to select a star. I look forward to hearing how

these stars guide our thoughts and how they might shape our prayers in this coming year. Amen.