

WHAT IF HEROD HAD SUCCEEDED?**Matthew 2:1-12****(Read Matthew 2:1-12)**

INTRO: We are in our last message in our WHAT IF? series and it asks, What if Herod had succeeded? I just read the first 12 verses of Matthew 2 which deals specifically with the Wise Men, (Magi as the NIV refers to them), with Herod, and to a certain extent the religious leaders in Jerusalem, and the Christ child in Bethlehem. He is probably by now quite a number of months old, maybe even two years. He and his parents are still in Bethlehem and have not returned to Nazareth – so that probably indicates he is still too young to travel.

In verse 16, which I did not read, Herod lays out an edict to have all male children of age 2 and under in Bethlehem and its vicinity killed because he was threatened. He was threatened by a baby.

In verse 13, which I also did not read, we see that Jesus's parents were told by the Spirit to escape to Egypt and they dodged the murder of their child. For certain, Herod did not succeed.

But, what if he had? What if this jealous, ruthless, and infinitely insecure puppet king had actually been able to, along with the murder of all other boys his age in the region, murdered Jesus? What would have happened? God would have had another plan. But as we've said time and time again over the past month, God's plan is what succeeds, and that means that it could have never happened that Jesus would have been murdered by King Herod. His murder was later down the timeline of God's plan on a horrible day that we call Good Friday. But, just to answer my question, things certainly would have been different. Fortunately, things went according to God's plan, and certainly NOT according to Herod's plan.

Our passage for today is a picture of first responses. First responders is a term that we weren't very familiar with before September 11, 2001. It was at that point that hundreds of first responders came to the twin World Trade Center towers after airplanes had crashed into them. These police, fire fighters, and other emergency personnel are remembered for thinking nothing for their own safety and rushing into the crumbling buildings, rescuing many and, in the process, many lost their own lives. They were truly heroes.

Over this past nine months as we've seen the COVID pandemic surge and recede, and surge and recede, we have seen how first responders have again stepped into the gap. Police, and even more so, EMTs and firefighters, have had to selflessly work with people who just may have been infected with one of the most ravaging diseases in history. They then take their patients to the hospital where doctors and nurses work on those people, again selflessly exposing themselves to the danger of this virus. We have seen signs up in front of certain houses proclaiming A HERO LIVES HERE. With definitions of what a hero truly is aside, I am glad for those people who work in the hospitals and man the ambulances, and protect us and, are the first on the scene if we have trouble.

My friend Dan lives near Samaritan hospital. On Wednesday night, there were sirens everywhere around the hospital. He and his family were concerned and wondered what was happening. So his son-in-law hopped in his truck and went to investigate. What he found were ambulances and fire trucks and police cruisers driving around the hospital, literally circling it, blowing their horns and blaring their sirens. They were honoring the hospital workers for the good work that they do. Now I'm not sure that that is a good thing to do at 9:00 p.m. It may have been better suited to have it earlier in the evening when people wouldn't think the world was crashing in. But I am moved by first responders honoring other first responders.

I want to look at the first responses of the wise men here in this passage and of Herod and the people of Jerusalem. It is a study in contrasts

First the wise men...

They came with the intent to worship

- The NIV, which I use, calls these men Magi, and they weren't necessarily just three. They may have been on an entire band, which is how Peterson portrays them in his paraphrase called THE MESSAGE. It seems the way the number three was established and what we hear in *We Three Kings*, and see in paintings and nativity scenes, is the fact that three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh are mentioned. So, we don't know how many there were, and it doesn't really matter. They WERE there.
- The name Magi indicates that they were astronomers, or even astrologers who looked to the stars to predict the future and explain the times. As they looked at the heavens they saw a star in the west that they knew was different and that they knew had a message they needed to follow.

- Since they were probably Persians or from Babylon, this was no short journey and no small undertaking. They traveled following the star which brought them to Judea. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they did what any good traveler would do in those days, they went to the boss. They found King Herod, and they asked “*Where is the King of the Jews to be found?*” Why? Because they had come to worship him.
- This is significant. Here are pagans and most definitely not Jews. If they were aware at all of Jewish teaching it was probably limited. Nevertheless, they knew that the one to whom this star was leading them was worthy of worship. Somehow they knew they were seeking a child and yet he was greater than they were and their natural response was to worship him.
- What we see in Jerusalem is a completely different response. In verse 3 we read...

Herod and all Jerusalem were disturbed

- Other translations use the word “frightened” which I think is helpful here and probably more accurate. Herod is usually the one who is remembered for his response, but I think it's significant that all Jerusalem, which, when you really look at it, means the religious and political establishment, were worried about this news as well.
- Herod was worried about maintaining his power. He was infamous for his savagery and his cold-blooded killing and elimination of anyone who threatened his power. He was not truly a Jew, yet he had the title given to him by the Roman Emperor of “King of the Jews”. Truth be told, he was a puppet king, and he knew it, and his insecurity because of that, was palpable.
- He found out about the competition, this child born King of the Jews, from traveling Magi from thousands of miles away. The religious leaders who shared his concern, didn't even seem to have their long-awaited Messiah on their radar. Maybe, they weren't waiting at all, come to think of it.
- But back to Herod: he knew enough about the Jewish Messiah to be threatened, and this is a huge contrast from the Magi, whose response was to go and worship. Herod's response was fear, defensiveness, lies, and deceit.
- Here's a truth, nothing good comes out of paranoid fear. Fear produces reaction when what is needed is action. We've seen that this year. So many decisions have been made out of fear rather than out of wise consideration. Don't get me wrong, there has been much wise consideration, but, at the same time, many more things have happened because of fear, and the harm that has come from it will have far-reaching ramifications.
- Herod's reaction also caused great harm. He deceitfully sent the Magi on their way telling them to go find the Messiah so that he could go and worship too. Truthfully all he wanted to do was destroy.

Look at the contrast:

- The Magi found Jesus. Verse 10 tells us that they were overjoyed. Other translations say they were “overwhelmed with joy”. As you read the passage the element of joy seems to be oozing out of them.
- Then verse 11 tells us that they find the child and they bow down and worship him and give him lavish and extravagant gifts. A peasant child in a backwater town receives worship and offerings. The Magi knew who he really was.
- Here's an interesting thing: these pagan magicians from the East are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they do not return to him. They may have been considered pagan, but they were in tune with the Holy Spirit.
- Now compare that to Herod. His response, as we already established, was fear. Herod hoped the Child wasn't who he thought he was. When we read further in Matthew 2:16, we see, as I mentioned earlier, that Herod made a decree that all boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under were to be killed. Herod's response was death, mayhem, and destruction. What an amazing contrast!
- We don't know what happened to the Magi when they returned to their homes. I can't help but think they paved the way for the Gospel forty, fifty, or a hundred years later. It's also significant that the Church is growing in Iran (the modern name for Persia) today, despite incredible persecution from the Muslims in power.
- We do know that Herod died a miserable and horrible death soon after this time period described in Matthew 2. He wanted to kill the Messiah. He wanted to stop God's plan. Instead Herod got stopped.

Conclusion: We can “What if?” until the cows come home. We can “What if?” for all of eternity. But the plans of men failed and the plan of God prevailed – as it always does. This is what we celebrate at Christmas and it culminates on Easter Day. Amen.