The Night-Shift Shepherds

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On Bethlehem Against Jerusalem, the Magi Who Took the Long Journey, and the Margin Versus the Marginalized

Hope at the Extreme Ends of the Spectrum

Sometimes we encounter testimonies that are on what appear to be extreme ends of the spectrum. Hope on one end. Loss on the other. We hear the testimony of a sister or brother who has just lost a beloved family member to death, and in the same breath we hear them name how God spared the life of a child or saved them from some other catastrophe. And the question rises in us, how can both be true? How can God of heaven save one child and at the same time allow another to be taken?

These are very difficult things to understand. Is God just playing dice with our lives? Is God just screwing with us? I do not believe so. But this is where faith comes in. This is where doubling-down on our belief becomes the actual decision in front of us. Because the alternative, if you stand back and try to make rational sense of the apparent inconsistency without faith, is exactly what Herod did. Herod doubled down too, but he doubled down in his works against God's action, not in his trust of God's action. And the Magi did the opposite. They doubled down in their belief that God was doing something in the world, even though they did not fully understand it. Who are we going to be today? Doubling-down with Herod, against God's action?

Or doubling-down with the Magi, in trust of God's action even when we cannot fully see the shape of it?

This Is the Generation of Jesus Christ

And the entire second chapter of Matthew is leading on from this central question. Matthew 1:1 opens with the phrase "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ." The Greek phrase (biblos geneseōs) is the exact same phrase used throughout the book of Genesis to introduce the major generational sections, "these are the generations of . . ." (Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; and so on). Matthew is signaling that his Gospel is about new creation, the new genesis of the world through Jesus Christ. And the book of Matthew is the long answer to the question: what does new creation actually look like in this world?

It does not look like skyscrapers and business portfolios and political intrigues. We see all of that. And we see, line after line after line in Matthew, how God rejects those forms of social order as the location of his actual activity. God is living out here on the margins. Right on the pale of society. Whereas the world thinks it knows where the centers of civilization are: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Miami. Where the art happens. Where the music is made. Where billions of dollars of business transact through the banking sector. Where decisions are made for societies around the world in Washington, D.C. Nobody is starting an NFL team in Cross Plains, Tennessee. The Cross Plains Grasshoppers are not on the league schedule. Those are not the centers of power.

But what we have to recognize as the people of God is that the centers-of-power-out-there are not our enemy. That is our work. That is our field to work in. We run into those places as the people of God. We do not retreat from them into some rural no-man's-land. But wherever we are running into, we have to remember: We are people from nowhere on a road to

somewhere. We are living in the Bethlehems of the world. The no-count backwater cow-towns, or in Bethlehem's case, the no-count sheep-towns. And from those nowhere-Bethlehems, we make our witness against the Jerusalems where the power-brokers live.

Split-Screen: Bethlehem and Jerusalem

And the way Matthew tells the story in chapter 2 is essentially split-screen. Listen:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem . . " (Matthew 2:1).

Two cities. Two images. On one side of the split-screen, Bethlehem: a tiny village on the outskirts of Israel, with the newborn Jesus there in fragile infancy. On the other side, Jerusalem: the great religious capital, with King Herod presiding from his throne in the company of all the power-brokers of the region. And Matthew is going to show us, across this chapter, how the action of God flows through the Bethlehem side of the screen while the imperial reaction flows through the Jerusalem side.

Think about what a baby actually is. An infant has no power, no strength. A newborn cannot tell you what is wrong. A newborn cannot tell you whether they will make it through the night. Have you ever been the parent of an infant with croup, sitting in a bathroom at two in the morning with the shower running to steam the room, holding the baby who looks like they might not be able to take their next breath, trying to decide whether to drive to the emergency room or wait it out? Stupid twenty-four-year-old parents, that was me, trying to look into the baby's soul and read whether they would survive the next ten minutes. That is what a baby is. Innocent. Weak. Powerless. Entirely dependent on the care of those around them.

And this is the side of the split-screen that God has chosen to operate through. In the days of King Herod. The years of imperial Roman administration. And if this were a movie, you

would be hearing minor chords every time the camera cut from the Bethlehem-baby image to the Jerusalem-Herod image. Dun dun dun. Matthew is composing a comparison.

And the comparison gets even more striking when you remember what Matthew 1 had already done. The genealogy in Matthew 1 had been a long list of bad kings, marginalized women, scandalous backgrounds, and divine intervention working through it all. Tamar. Rahab. Ruth. Bathsheba. Women on the margins who acted in courage against the poor behavior of the men in their lives. And somehow, through this long stream of failed and marginalized characters, God brought forth the Messianic line. And now we are watching the same dynamic in real time. God is acting through this man Joseph and this woman Mary (both marginalized by society, both in the no-count village of Bethlehem, both bearing what looks to outside eyes like reproach) and the religious and political establishment over in Jerusalem is missing the entire act.

Why Not the Caesars?

Why did God not choose the Caesars to be the vehicle of his Messianic action? Why not Augustus? Augustus had the power and the means to solve the problems of hunger. He had unlimited wealth. He could have ended starvation across the entire Mediterranean basin with the resources at his command. But God did not work through Augustus. God worked through a peasant couple in a backwater village whose only credentials were the courage to say yes to a divine commission that would cost them everything in social respectability.

Mary could have said no. When the angel announced the divine commission, Mary could have said, do not be it unto me, and the angel would have moved on to another candidate. Instead, Mary said, be it unto me according to thy word (Luke 1:38). She accepted the reproach.

Joseph could have walked away. When he discovered Mary was pregnant, the law gave him every right to put her away. Even a merciful man like Joseph, intent on doing the kind thing

rather than the publicly-humiliating thing, had every legal warrant to dissociate from her. And the angel appeared to Joseph and explained the situation, and Joseph chose to bear the reproach alongside her (Matthew 1:18–25). Joseph said yes to a divine commission that would mean carrying public shame for the rest of his marriage.

And those two yeses, Mary's and Joseph's, are the human-side foundation of everything Matthew 2 is about to describe. God is acting through human beings whose only qualification is their willingness to bear divine reproach. No political power. No religious credentials. No economic security. Just two people who said yes to what God was doing in their bodies and their household, and who paid the social cost of the yes.

And Matthew anchors all of this in Isaiah's announcement, which Matthew 1 quotes:

"'Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14).

And here is what Isaiah was actually doing when he announced this. Isaiah was standing in the southern kingdom of Judah, wagging his prophetic finger at the power-moves of Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel that were coming against the weakened Judah. Their good king Uzziah had died. There was a power vacuum in the south. The northern kingdom and Syria were pressing in. And in the middle of that political crisis, God speaks through Isaiah and says: a maiden will conceive and bear a Son, and his name shall be called Immanuel, God with us. And then in Isaiah 9, Isaiah pushes further:

> For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. (Isaiah 9:6–7)

Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace. And these are words spoken by a weak prophet who has nothing. No imperial backing. No military force. No financial resources. Just the voice of a weak prophet speaking against power that seems inevitable. And from that weak voice, in the middle of imperial pressure, comes one of the most enduring announcements in the entire Old Testament. The maiden will conceive. The Son will be given. The government will be on his shoulder. The Prince of Peace will arrive.

The Son of God

And the title Son of God itself comes from one of the most important promises in the Old Testament. Listen to 2 Samuel 7, when David wanted to build a temple for the Lord and the prophet Nathan brings God's response:

> When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. (2 Samuel 7:12–14)

I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. David, "a man of blood" who could not himself build the temple because of the wars he had fought, was told that his son would be the temple-builder, and that the relationship between God and that son would be the Father-Son relationship that would later define everything about how Israel understood Messianic kingship. The Son of David. The Son of God. The future king of Israel. These are not three separate categories. They are three names for the same anticipated figure.

And in Matthew 2, the anticipated figure has just been born. God is choosing the weak and the marginalized. He is choosing the innocent weak child in Bethlehem to confound the power that is in Jerusalem.

Herod, a Man of Action

And just look at what we know historically about Herod the Great. His architectural accomplishments were genuinely impressive. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. He built fortresses across Judea. He held substantial authority within the Roman imperial system. He was a player. But he killed his enemies systematically. He even arranged for the execution of several high-ranking, well-loved leaders within his court just before his own death, so that there would be public mourning in Judea on the day he died. That last detail is one of the darkest things in the historical record about him. He could not bear the thought that the population would celebrate his death, so he engineered a guaranteed period of mourning by having admired people executed at the same moment.

Side by side with the act of God in Bethlehem is the action of Herod in Jerusalem. And the comparison is what Matthew wants us to hold in our minds across the chapter.

And the Magi enter the story:

". . . behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him'" (Matthew 2:1–2).

Wise men from the East. The Greek word is magoi: magi. And these magi are not principally "wise men" in the modern English sense. They are something more like the court magicians of the ancient Near East: the diviners, the astrologers, the dream-interpreters who served in royal courts to read signs and omens. Think of the magicians at Nebuchadnezzar's court in Daniel 2, the ones who could not interpret the king's dream and were threatened with execution. Think of the magicians at Pharaoh's court in Exodus 7, the ones who tried to match Moses's plagues sign-for-sign until they finally had to admit, "This is the finger of God"

(Exodus 8:19). Magi were a known professional category in the surrounding empires. And the surprise here is that Gentile court-magicians from somewhere east of Judea are seeing what the religious establishment of Jerusalem is not seeing.

Everybody in that part of the world could have looked up at the same sky and seen what these magi saw. The folks in Jerusalem did not see it. Herod did not see it. The wise men in Herod's own court did not see it. Something was being signaled in the heavens that was visible to anyone with eyes for it, and the magi from the East had eyes for it, while the religious and political establishment closest to the actual event was looking the other way.

Power Trembles

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled (Matthew 2:3). Greek: etarachthē, deeply disturbed. And all Jerusalem with him. This is exactly what happened in Daniel 5 when Belshazzar was drinking with his buddies and thinking life was grand, and a hand appeared on the wall to write the unsettling words that meant the end of his kingdom (Daniel 5:1–6). Power trembles when it encounters a sign it cannot control.

Nothing threatens power like weak, marginalized people who find their voice in God and begin to speak out against the abuses of power. Nothing causes the powerful to tremble like marginalized people who refuse to believe that the powerful have the last word. Empire trembles before prophets, not before competing empires. Empire knows how to handle competing empires: they fight, they negotiate, they form alliances. Empire does not know how to handle a prophet announcing a different kingdom entirely. And Herod, on hearing the magi's announcement, was deeply disturbed.

And Herod assembled his religious experts:

"And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born" (Matthew 2:4).

And here is an extra detail in the Greek that is worth noting. The word translated "gathered" in Matthew 2:4 is synagagōn, the verb form of the word synagogue. When you start to read through the rest of Matthew with this in mind, every time you see people gathering in synagogues, putting people out of synagogues, plotting against Jesus in synagogues, the same verb root recurs. Synagogue-gathering becomes a recurrent pattern in Matthew, and almost every time the word appears, the gathering is going to be hostile to the work of Jesus. And Herod's first synagogue-gathering, here in Matthew 2:4, sets the pattern for the entire Gospel.

And we have to be very careful within the church that we are not gathering together to build power. If we think that our assembly is a consolidation of power so that we can control our world around us, then we have become nothing different from the synagogue-gatherings Matthew is going to track all the way to Caiaphas's high-priestly council that condemns Jesus to death. But when we gather together with the only purpose of giving and serving and sharing with people outside the gathering, that is a different kind of gathering altogether. That is what Christ will later call ekklēsia, the called-out assembly (Matthew 16:18). Same root concept, gathering, but with the purpose flipped from inward consolidation to outward dispersal.

They Knew the Verse

> And here is what is genuinely striking about the chief priests' answer to Herod:
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> So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.'" (Matthew 2:5–6, quoting Micah 5:2)

They knew the verse. They knew exactly where the Messiah was going to be born. Micah 5:2. Off the top of their heads, without consulting their scrolls. And how many times across the rest of Matthew's Gospel do we see these same religious experts leaving Jerusalem to go down the six miles to Bethlehem to see if anything was actually happening down there? Not one time. They knew the scripture. They quoted it accurately. And they took zero action on what they knew.

Now meanwhile, you have Gentile magi from somewhere far to the east, who had never studied the Hebrew scriptures, who did not have the prophetic background, who were operating only on what they had observed in the sky, and they had traveled for what was apparently about two years to come and worship the very King the chief priests had just identified by name and birthplace. The Gentiles who did not know the scripture took action. The Jewish religious experts who knew the scripture stayed home.

And as I read this story, I find myself asking the honest question, who am I in this narrative? Sometimes I am Herod, holding on to power. Sometimes I am little baby Jesus, vulnerable and dependent. Sometimes I am the magi, taking the long journey on partial light. And sometimes, and this is the most uncomfortable identification, I am one of the chief priests, quoting scripture chapter and verse without ever taking a single step in the direction of what the scripture is actually pointing toward.

Have you ever found that true of yourself? Oh, yes, Rob. I have gotten into debate after debate after debate over some minutiae of scripture. Separated very close friends over arguments about textual interpretation. But my life did not indicate one step in faith that I actually believed Jesus was a baby born in Bethlehem. In my mind, the Messiah was still among the elite up in

Jerusalem. And I was over here in my own Jerusalem, quoting the chapter and verse without ever loading the donkey for the journey south.

Do My Feet Betray My Words?

Do my feet betray what my words say? Do my hands stay by my sides while the world is in need? That is the question Matthew 2 puts to every one of us who can quote the scripture but has not yet moved in the direction of its meaning. The world is begging for somebody to come. Begging for somebody to take action. And the chapter wants to know whether our knowledge of the scripture is going to be the kind of knowledge the chief priests had, accurate and stationary, or the kind the magi had: partial but mobile.

And then Herod takes the action that completes the split-screen:

> Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” (Matthew 2:7–8)

That I may come and worship Him also. Listen to the deception in that line. Herod has no intention of worshiping the child. Herod intends to kill the child. But the language he uses to the magi is the language of devotion, of religious sincerity, of wanting-to-do-the-right-thing. And the rest of Matthew’s Gospel will keep returning to this same pattern, religious-establishment figures using devotional language while planning destructive action against the very Christ they claim to be honoring.

I work for a Fortune 100 company. And let me say something honest about how this same pattern operates in contemporary corporate America. The company I work for, like every other large corporation, has its public-facing messaging about caring for the underserved, the

marginalized, the people on the edges of society. There is a month for every marginalized group. Marketing campaigns. Internal-communications campaigns. Statement-issuing in support of various causes. And in the private sessions, the meetings I am also in, the language sometimes shifts. The marketing-language is recognized for what it is: a public-facing performance that lets the company check a box. I am in the meetings where the actual decisions get made. And I have watched the gap between what gets said publicly and what gets prioritized internally. It is real. It is structural. And it is exactly the same dynamic Matthew 2:8 describes, devotional language deployed by power for purposes that have nothing to do with the devotion the language was originally meant to express. Herod said "that I may come and worship Him also." Some of our contemporary versions of Herod say similar things, in different vocabularies, for the same reasons.

Overwhelmed With Joy

And the magi proceed:

> When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:9–11)

They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. Hyper-superlative in the Greek (echarēsan charan megalēn sphodra), literally "they rejoiced with great joy exceedingly." Matthew is stacking the joy-language as high as the syntax will allow. And the joy is not because they have arrived at a great palace. The joy is because the long journey on partial light has finally brought

them to its destination, and the destination is a child with his mother, in a house in a small village.

The magi are examples of what discipleship actually looks like. You think you see something, something in the heavens that is guiding you toward something beyond yourself. You do not know exactly what it means or where it will lead. But you take the step. You move in the direction. You face obstacles, you encounter Herodian power-figures along the way, but you keep moving. And what you find at the destination is not what you expected. We want to find the king. We want to find power, military might, chariots, wealth, prowess. We want to find a throne-room. And the magi found a baby in his mother's arms in a small house in a backwater village. And they fell on their knees and worshiped him.

Not at the temple. The worship is not happening at the temple. The temple is up in Jerusalem, where the chief priests are still sitting comfortably with Herod. The worship is happening down in Bethlehem, around a child whose mother is holding him. And when we read John's Gospel later, we will hear Jesus tell the Samaritan woman that worship is no longer principally tied to Jerusalem (John 4:21–24). Why? Because Jesus himself has become the place of worship. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14): literally, tabernacled among us. Jesus is the new temple. Jesus is the center of worship. The magi find him not on Temple Mount, but in his mother's arms, and they fall down and worship.

> And the gold-frankincense-and-myrrh gifts fulfill a specific Old Testament expectation:
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> Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you . . . The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising . . . The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all

> those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord. (Isaiah 60:1, 3, 6)

The Gentiles shall come to your light. They shall bring gold and incense. This is exactly what is happening here. The Gentile magi from the East have come to the light. They have brought the gold. They have brought the incense. The wealth of the nations is flowing in, the very prophecy Isaiah had announced for Israel's restoration is being fulfilled in this single small house in Bethlehem. And the people who had memorized Isaiah did not come to see it happen. Only the Gentile foreigners with their partial light did.

Joseph Takes Action

And then the angel speaks to Joseph in a dream:

> Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night, and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." (Matthew 2:13–15, quoting Hosea 11:1)

Joseph got up and took the child and his mother by night. No second dream. No fleece. No asking for confirmation. He had heard the word from the Lord, and he took action. Sometimes that is the scariest place to be, to have a moment when you think God is saying something to you, and to take action on it without further confirmation. But Joseph's immediate obedience here saved the life of the Messiah.

And notice the typological echo. This Joseph's father was named Jacob (Matthew 1:16). The previous Joseph in Genesis, the dreamer of dreams, was the son of Jacob. Both Josephs are dreamers. Both Josephs save the line of Judah from destruction. Both Josephs go down into Egypt to do the saving. Matthew is composing a parallel. And he makes the parallel explicit by quoting Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called My Son," a verse that originally referred to Israel coming out of Egypt under Moses but is now applied to Jesus coming out of Egypt under Joseph's protection. Jesus is the new Israel, reduced to one body. The pattern of Israel's deliverance from Egypt is being recapitulated in the body of the Son.

Rachel Weeping

And then comes one of the darkest moments in Matthew:

> Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16–18, quoting Jeremiah 31:15)

The massacre of the innocents. And the pattern echoes Pharaoh's massacre of the Hebrew male children in Exodus 1, when Moses was born. Same imperial logic. Same target-demographic. Same attempt to kill the deliverer before he can grow up. And just as Pharaoh's edict was undermined by the lowly midwives who conspired to save the Hebrew children (Exodus 1:15–22), Herod's edict was undermined by the angel speaking to Joseph in a dream and by the magi conspiring not to return to him with the child's location. The marginalized

continually undermine imperial power in this narrative. Midwives, magi, peasants who hear angels in dreams. The empire keeps thinking it has the power, and the lowly keep saving the future.

And the application is direct in our own moment. Empire today has allowed drugs and sex and various exploitations to infiltrate our communities and our households so deeply that we struggle to know how to speak about it. If we open our mouth, we will be called a prude. Or judgmental. Or angry. And yet; we have all been there. We have all been addicted to something. To sex. To drugs. To approval. To pornography. To the next promotion at work. To something that has taken a hold of our interior that we cannot break by sheer willpower. The diagnostic is universal even if the specific addictive substance varies from person to person.

And what does Rachel-weeping-for-her-children look like in our own moment? Look at the twenty-one-year-old women in dark basements in our cities and suburbs. Look at the teenagers in pits of addiction whose minds have been numbed by so many things that they no longer know how to be reached. How does God reach down into those pits, into those desperate places, and pull the captive out and give her new life? The Father reaches down. That is the answer. And he reaches down through us, through people who refuse to retreat into anger and condemnation, but who go in compassion, and stand at the edge of the pit, and offer the hand. No wonder there is a shout of joy and praise when the captive is pulled out.

And the Jeremiah 31 passage that Matthew quotes is one of the most pastorally hopeful chapters in the entire Old Testament. Yes, Rachel is weeping for her children. The verse Matthew cites is real grief, real loss, real bereavement. But the chapter that contains the verse goes on to announce the new covenant:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah . . . But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31, 33)

I will write My law on their hearts. That is the resolution of Rachel's weeping that Jeremiah 31 announces. The weeping is real. The grief is real. And the answer to the grief is the new covenant in which God himself writes his law on the interior of his people, accomplishing internally what the imperial massacre could never accomplish externally. Matthew is quoting Jeremiah's grief-verse precisely because Jeremiah's grief-verse sits inside Jeremiah's new-covenant chapter. The weeping has an answer. The answer is the very Child the imperial massacre was trying to destroy.

The Herods Do Not Go Away

And the chapter ends with the family returning from Egypt, but with a critical political detail:

> But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene." (Matthew 2:22–23)

Archelaus reigned in his father's place. One Herod dies, another Herod rises. The political pattern does not get broken by the death of a single tyrant. We are not going to vote the Herods out of the world. We are not going to shout them out, or organize them out, or strategize

them out. The way to get rid of the Herods is to continue to live in a way that subverts the Herodian pattern from underneath: gradually, generation by generation, by people who keep choosing the Bethlehem-side of the split-screen even when the Jerusalem-side is offering them better short-term returns.

And the Bethlehem-pattern looks like this. We live in a way that does not expect a return. We give without keeping score. We serve without performance-metrics. We bear reproach the way Mary and Joseph bore it, without seeking the social rehabilitation that would let us return to respectability on the kingdoms-of-this-world's terms. And we trust that God himself will be our reward. That is how the Herods finally get subverted. Not by counter-imperial action. By Bethlehem-style fidelity sustained across generations until the empire's exhaustion is more obvious than its strength.

The Margin and the Marginalized

And let me make one more application of this contrast before we close the chapter. Our contemporary corporate world has become structurally obsessed with what we call "margin": the financial spread between revenue and cost, the bottom-line indicator of how much profit a business is generating. And margin optimization has become, in many corporate settings, the dominant religious framework. Everything else gets measured against whether it helps or hurts the margin.

Let me make this honest with my own work-life. I work in a Fortune 100 corporate environment. And this past holiday season, I had to furlough approximately one hundred people. I am the person who signed off on the furlough decisions. I am that guy. The furlough was structured to last until the first part of the new year, so that the company could make budget for the prior quarter and possibly distribute bonuses to the people who remained. God help me. God

help us all. We have built a system that focuses on the margin instead of the marginalized. Our corporate language tracks the margin obsessively. Our corporate practices, when push comes to shove, sacrifice the marginalized to protect the margin.

And the kingdom of God reverses this exactly. The kingdom of God is not focused on the margin. The kingdom of God is focused on the marginalized. And the only permanent way to help the marginalized is to run into their lives. To go in the way that the Father has gone in. In the flesh. With the cross-shape. With the willingness to bear reproach. We are called to participate in the empire of God, which is an empire of the weak and the marginalized: an empire any of us can join, because every one of us is weak in some register or other, and every one of us has been marginalized somewhere along the way.

Come on. Join the ranks. Stand up against power. Refuse to focus on the boundary. Get outside these four walls and express the kingdom in our workplaces, in our families, in the communities where we live and work. There is no boundary to those who are in Christ Jesus. The whole earth belongs to him. Be priests in this earth. Connect with people. Suffer with them. Weep with them.

The Lion Is the Lamb

And the apocalyptic image of how the kingdom finally prevails comes in Revelation 5, *which I am going to close with, briefly*:

> And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals . . . So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.” And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne

> and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (Revelation 5:1, 4–6)

John heard a voice announcing the Lion of the tribe of Judah. That is what John expected to see. The Lion. The one who tears anything that comes against the pride. The one who would finally take action against the surrounding empires. But when John turned to see, he saw a Lamb. Slain. Wounded. Bleeding. And this dead-martyred Lamb has seven eyes (all wisdom) and seven horns (all power). Power and wisdom resident in a slaughtered Lamb.

There is a wisdom in the weakness we have chosen to follow. When we choose faith over power, we are not principally choosing weakness as an end in itself. We are choosing the Lion-Lamb pattern that Revelation 5 reveals as the actual operating principle of the throne room of heaven. Power belongs to the Lamb. Wisdom belongs to the Lamb. The slaughter and the sovereignty are unified in a single body. And the people who follow the Lamb live the same paradox in their own bodies.

Jesus rebukes his disciples again and again across the Gospels for trying to grasp the Herodian pattern. When James and John ask to sit at his right hand and his left hand in the kingdom, he says, the Gentiles seek that kind of hierarchy and authority, but not so among you. The greatest in the kingdom will be the servant of all (Matthew 20:25–27). When the disciples want to call down fire on the Samaritan village that rejected them, Jesus rebukes them and says, you do not know what spirit you are of (Luke 9:54–55). The kingdom keeps rejecting the Herod-pattern from inside its own ranks.

So let us go into this world and serve. Let us start at home, with our spouses, with our children. Let us serve them, not in the hierarchical, patriarchal ways the world has practiced for

millennia, but in the disruptive way Jesus has been teaching. And from the household, let us move outward into our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our cities, our nations. Bearing the reproach. Carrying the cross. Following the Lamb who is also the Lion. Living the Bethlehem-pattern in the middle of every Jerusalem that surrounds us. Until the Father, who has been writing his law on our hearts since the day we said yes to him, brings the consummation he has been promising since the angels announced peace on earth to the night-shift shepherds over a field in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

I love Jesus. I love the baby in the manger. And let me be honest about a piece of this that is hard for contemporary readers to feel. We sometimes can only worship the resurrected Lord, the post-Easter Christ who is exalted to the right hand of the Father. And there is nothing wrong with worshiping the resurrected Lord. He is worthy. But the chapter wants us to consider: before the cross, before the resurrection, before the temple debates with the religious establishment, there were people who believed in the eight-pound infant Jesus and worshiped him in his vulnerability. That is the deeper test of faith. Would we have worshiped the baby, knowing nothing about what he would become, looking only at the small body in his mother's arms, with no logical evidence to support our worship except the partial light we had been given, would we have fallen on our knees in that small house in Bethlehem with the magi? Or would we have stayed up in Jerusalem with the chief priests, quoting Micah 5:2 to anyone who asked, but never loading the donkey for the journey south?

Lord, give us magi-faith. The faith that travels the long road on the partial light. The faith that ignores the Herods and finds the household. The faith that opens the treasures and offers the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh. The faith that walks the Bethlehem-pattern through

every Jerusalem. Until the kingdom we are walking in becomes more obvious than the kingdoms that have been competing with it. Amen.