

The Competition of Christmas

Matthew 2:1-12, 15

It may be the most wonderful time of the year, but for many it is the most competitive time of the year. We learn it early in life, especially if we have siblings. Who's got the most gifts under the tree? Who's got the biggest? Then we go back to school after Christmas break, and what's one of the first things kids say to each other? "Whadyouget? Hey, check out what I got." We compete to see who got the biggest, the best, the brightest.

Does all that really change when we get older? A bit. But not completely, does it? It becomes more subtle. It moves to different areas, but for so many of us Christmas is a time of year that brings out our competitive nature. We want to be the best and do the best, and Christmas provides so many opportunities to prove just how much better we are, or if the emotional pendulum swings the other way, plenty of opportunities to compare ourselves to others and find all the ways we don't measure up. So, we go through Christmas in the dumps, depressed, and just feeling like we don't matter. Even for those of us who don't look at all of life as a race to win, or lose, Christmas is a time where we've got so many things competing for our time and attention.

We get one side of the family competing with the other side. Brothers and sisters no longer compete over who got the best presents, but who gave the best Christmas. Adult children compete with their parent's expectations. If you don't come here, you'll be the only one missing. Husbands and wives compete with each other. Where we will go? How long we will stay? Whose family traditions we will honor? There's the competition of exes and steps, broken family and extended family. Our competitive spirit comes out in how we decorate our houses. We want to impress our family, our friends, our coworkers, and if everything isn't just right it ruins our Christmas spirit. Teresa told me about one person she works with who said that for the whole month of December they could not eat at their table, because his wife had specially decorated it for Christmas dinner and wanted it to look perfect all month long.

We compete over who can lay out the best Christmas spread and cook the best Christmas dinner. We compete with ourselves, our own expectations and desires, and our own gilded memories of Christmas past that never really was quite the way we remember it.

The thing that concerns me is that with all of this competition, in trying to outdo everyone else, and just trying to keep up with everything and everyone competing for our time, the one we really end

up competing with is Jesus. The one time of year that we should be able to focus on him, is the time that everything else conspires to push him off the throne of our hearts.

This brings us to our text this morning in Matthew 2 where we have the wise men who want to find Jesus to worship Him, and King Herod who wants to find Jesus to kill him. You see for Herod, Jesus was competition. There wasn't room in Herod's heart for both Jesus and himself. Whenever there's a competition with Jesus in your heart, something must die.

After telling us the backstory of Joseph and Mary, Matthew covers the birth of Jesus in one verse in Matthew 1:25. He then jumps right to the story of the wise men or the magi from the east. He begins chapter 2 this way, "*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 doesn't just mention Herod to root this story in time and place. Herod becomes the bad guy in the story. He is the nemesis.

He was Herod the First, the founder of the Herodian dynasty, but we know him as Herod the Great. Herod went to every length imaginable to gain that reputation. He rose to power through a combination of intrigue and military muscles, but mostly it was his prowess at navigating the treacherous waters of Roman politics. He won the support of Caesar and secured a Senatorial proclamation declaring him King of Judea.

Once power was in his grasp, he held on to it with a tenacious grip. He used a carrot when it suited his purposes. Herod is considered the greatest builder in Jewish history. He was responsible for colossal construction projects from one end of the country to the other including the massive rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. He built impressive cities such as Caesarea by the Sea and formidable strongholds such as mountain top fortress of Masada. He would curry favor with lavish gifts and extensive public works projects. In this sense, he was truly Herod the Great.

However, when the carrot didn't work, Herod was not shy about using the stick. So great was his lust for power, that he saw subterfuge and conspiracy everywhere. Armed with his notorious paranoia and insatiable ambition, he spied on his own people with secret police, he dealt with disagreements with brutality, and he executed many of his own family members.

We see all of this in his appearance in the Christmas story. With one hand he tries to win over the wise men, but with the other he strikes out in a bloody massacre on the most innocent of all victims. For Herod the birth of Jesus was nothing more than a threat to everything he had built for himself. He

had defeated all comers, and there was no way some punk kid from Bethlehem was going to take that away. How could he be Herod "The Great" if there was some other claim to the throne?

He's pulled into the story quite innocently by these wise men from the east. They're stargazers by trade, part Stephen Hawking and part Nostradamus. They're pagan purveyors of esoteric knowledge, tellers of fortunes, and adept at reading the signs. What it was they saw, and how they knew what it signified we can only guess. All we know for sure, is that they saw something strange in the sky and they followed it to Jerusalem of Judea. But where to go from here?

If someone has been born king, then who better to ask than royalty? They go to Jerusalem to see King Herod to get the GPS coordinates of this momentous event. These guys were magi. When these guys show up at your door, their reputation precedes them. They knew how to read the stars. They had insights into mysterious knowledge. They understood the secret things, and had the reputation of dealing in the supernatural. So, when they show up asking about one born king of the Jews, Herod freaks out. What do they know that I don't? What does this portend for my power?

Herod plays the consummate politician. He smiles for the cameras with a twinkle in his eye. He shakes the hands of the wise men for the front page photo-op. He speaks his exquisitely crafted words, *"Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."*

Now Herod had about as much intention of worshipping Jesus as Barry Lynn, Richard Dawkins, Bill Maher, and Bill Nye combined. You see, for Herod, Jesus was a threat. He was competition. Star or no star, there would be no other king. Herod was king in Judea, and he was the only star who mattered. Herod was Idumean by birth, but he claimed the title "King of the Jews." Now the wise men tell him of one *"who has been born king of the Jews."* There could only be one king on the throne. Whenever there are multiple claims competing for the throne, it doesn't usually look too pretty. Competitions over the throne are never calm and peaceful. They are usually bloody and brutal affairs. Herod wasn't the only one troubled, but so was all of Jerusalem. They all knew if there were two claims to the throne, it could get ugly.

That's how it was that first Christmas. That's still how it is this Christmas. Nothing's really changed. There are too many things competing for the throne. No, not the throne of Judea, but the throne of your heart. Here's the problem. There's only room on your throne for one. There's not room for Jesus and family; Jesus and career; Jesus and college; Jesus and power; Jesus and money; Jesus and fame; Jesus and comfort; Jesus and fun. There can be no Jesus AND. None of those things are evil in and

of themselves. They are even good things in their proper place, but none of them can share the throne with Jesus.

What happens in the competition of Christmas is that we either try squeeze other things on that throne. We start putting our own desires, our own expectations, our own feelings before Jesus. Or, our lives are so crammed and crowded and clustered with stuff that Jesus gets pushed out of the way. Our hearts become like a bad episode of hoarders where it gets so piled high with junk, we can't even find the throne in there, let alone Jesus.

We know this is true in principle. We know our spiritual lives are getting choked out. We know we need some major housecleaning, but as soon as you try to throw out any individual item, it becomes obvious that something else is on the throne. You ever notice that with those hoarding shows? The hoarders knows agrees to clean things up, but whenever they start to throw out a specific item, there's always a reason why they can't get rid of that. No, I got such a good deal on that. No, I've had that for thirty years. No, I could use that someday.

It's the same with the clutter in our hearts. No, I can't get rid of that, its too important to me. I have too much attachment to that. You can't ask me to get rid of that relationship, you don't know how it makes me feel. You can't ask me to wait until I'm married, this is what everyone does now. You can't ask me to give that habit up. Who are you to judge? You can't expect me to give like that, to have that kind of generosity. I just don't have that kind of room in my budget. You can't expect me to commit to serving others, I need that time for myself. You can't ask me to forgive them, you don't know what they did to me. As soon as Jesus grabs hold of an individual item in our heart, He becomes a threat. That's the real competition of Christmas, not who has the most presents, the nicest decorations, the biggest family gathering, or who prepares the best Christmas dinner, it's who is on the throne of your heart?

So what can we learn about the competition of Christmas from the text? What practical help does God's word have for us? The first point I would make is this. God allows the competition for our heart for a reason. He wants you to wrestle with this question.

Pay close attention to the order of events in the story. They follow the star west and it takes them as far as Judea, but once they got there, they didn't know where to go. The star didn't lead them straight to Bethlehem. So, in what may be the only time in recorded history, men stopped and asked for directions. That must be what made them truly wise. So, they find out from the priests and scribes that their destination is in Bethlehem, they head, and did you notice what the star did then? Verse 9 says, *"And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the*

place where the child was.” What? Why didn’t it do that to begin with? Why the detour in Jerusalem. Now we can discuss and debate whether the star was some sort of cosmological phenomenon that God was using, or if this was a purely supernatural miracle, either way God was behind it. It’s almost as if God purposefully led them to Herod, as though God wanted Herod brought into the story.

Now, at best, we can make some educated guesses as to why God would invite this sort of competitive threat into the story– to fulfill prophecy, to expose Herod, to illustrate early on that you have to make some sort of choice about Jesus. You can worship him or oppose him, but you cannot remain neutral. But here’s what you need to understand this morning. God will do the same thing in your life? He will lead you into situation where you have to make a choice. He will open the door in your life that may compete for the throne so that you will have to love on or serve the other. He won’t put himself on the throne of your heart. He wants you to do it in faith from a commitment of love.

So many times I just wish God would remove all the competition for my love and devotion from my life. I want God to just remove the temptation. God I don’t want to struggle with that anymore, and I pray for him just to take it away. It would be so much easier to serve Him, if I didn’t have desires for anything else. Oh, those pesky desires always competing for my time, my love, my attention, and even my worship. But peace in your heart and peace in your life will not come because Jesus takes away all the competitors. It will come because you put Him on the throne of your heart, and make Him Lord over all that would compete with him.

So Jesus may just let the clutter come in a Christmas time, and he picks up a piece and looks at it and says it’s just junk. Don’t you love me more than this? He picks up another piece and says it’s a nice trinket, but I am real treasure. At that point, something’s gotta go. Either you will let Jesus push that off the throne, or you will push Jesus off the throne. Christmas is just one of those times that has a way of exposing what’s really on the throne. It exposes our idols of money, idols of popularity, idols of importance, idols of family, idols of materialism.

A second lesson some of us need to learn, is the one the wise men followed. You need to go another way. Herod wanted the wise men to return and give him a report so that he might worship the child. His real intentions were completely different, but the magi had no way of knowing, and so God warns them in a dream, and *“they departed to their own country by another way.”* They took I-70 home instead of I-80.

Why did they do that? They didn’t try to sneak back through Jerusalem without Herod noticing. They didn’t try to outsmart him. They simply avoided him altogether. There was no reason to risk it.

They didn't need to take the chance. Why would they invite trouble into their lives, when they could avoid it altogether?

I just told you there are times when God will bring competition into your life for His reasons, and that is true. But if we're truly honest, sometimes the stuff that clutters our hearts is there because we've invited it there. Instead of avoiding the Herods in our lives, we've stopped by for a drink or two. We hang around and chit chat awhile. We think we're smarter than him. We think that he won't pull us into his trap, but we always do. We think we can play with fire without getting burned.

The best counsel I could give some of you this Christmas is go another way. Don't do it the same way you did before. Don't go to the same places. Don't do the same things. Don't fall into the same traps. There is a reason the Bible tells us to flee from temptation. We're not told to endure it, to test our limits, hang out as long as possible, get as close to the edge as we can. No, we are to flee. Go another way. Listen to this fantastic poem by Portia Nelson.

"I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes me a long time to get out.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in. It's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault. I get out immediately.

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

I walk down another street."

One final point I would make from the text is this. You are never too far away to come to Jesus. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been, you can come to Jesus. Matthew provides a compelling contrast. Even as Israel's ruler seeks to kill Jesus, he is worshiped by these pagans from a far country. Make no mistake, these guys weren't good Torah-believing Jews. Some try and speculate that these magi could trace their lineage all the way back to the prophet Daniel, and that is how they knew what this star meant. Mmmmmaybe. But make no mistake, these guys practiced astrology and fortune telling, and they were involved in practices forbidden by the Bible. But they were the ones, along with the lowly shepherds, who showed up to worship Jesus. They weren't too far away to worship Jesus. Where they were from, that they'd spent their whole lives doing what God said was abominable didn't keep them from Jesus. You're not too far away either.

Did you also notice, who didn't show up in Bethlehem. Herod consulted with all the chief priests and scribes of the people. These were the faith leaders, the spiritual experts, the religious leaders. They knew what was going on. They knew what it meant. They pointed to the right prophecy in Micah. They pointed to Bethlehem. They should have been first in line to welcome and worship the Messiah, but they were nowhere to be found. Just as some of you need to know you're not too far away to be kept from Jesus, others of us this morning need to know that you are not so close to him, you don't need him. Some of you have spent your whole life so close to Jesus, you don't think you need him. You just assume he's already on the throne of your heart. That's what the priests and scribes thought. They spent their whole lives in church and studying the Bible, they thought they knew God so well, but they missed him entirely when he came in the flesh.

Just being raised in the church doesn't mean Jesus is on the throne. Growing up in a Christian home doesn't mean Jesus is on the throne of your heart. Having all the biblical knowledge and being able to answer all the Bible trivia questions right, doesn't mean Jesus is on the throne of your heart. These priests and scribes had all the synagogue attendance ribbons. They could answer all the Bible questions on Jeopardy, but they never showed up to worship Jesus. We don't know why, but we can imagine their excuses— too busy. I have a service to conduct. I've got to study. My donkey's in the shop. For whatever reason, they never made their way to Bethlehem to worship Jesus, yet they knew all about it. Don't just coast through Christmas counting on your background, your knowledge, or some decision you made years ago.

Jesus was born in a manger, died on a cross, rose from a grave, and now he wants to be on the throne of your heart.