

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Being God’s People: An Alternative Kingdom”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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1 Samuel 2:22-26
Matthew 2:1-6

“It’s obvious”, he said. “It’s obvious why this program doesn’t work. See this semicolon here? It ought to be a colon. Change that and the program should run.” This conversation took place when I was a freshman in college. I had enjoyed my first computer science class and was on to my second one where we were learning a couple of languages. I had carefully typed out all of my punch cards, taken them to the computer center, turned them in and then waited over night for the program to be run. When I got the results, and it hadn’t run, I was crestfallen. Taking the printout back to my room I diligently scanned every line, looking for a mistake and nothing. Fortunately, my older brother made his one and only trip to see me in college. He was a computer whiz and so I asked him to take a look. With a simply, quick scan, he found the error, and told me what to correct...again mind you, telling me that it was obvious. As I stared at my obvious mistake the only thing obvious to me was that I was not meant to be a computer science major.

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been there when someone says, “it’s obvious” to something you can’t see or understand? If you have then not only would you fit in with me, but you would fit in with everyone in our story this morning, because it is all about things being obvious to one person and not to anyone else. Let’s begin. First there were the Wisemen. What was obvious to them was that the heavens were telling them, as astrologers, that a new king was to be born in Jerusalem. We know this was not obvious to anyone else because when they get to Jerusalem, their news puts everyone in a panic. Second, there was King Herod and the people of Jerusalem. What was obvious to them was that if there was a new king of the Jews being born, and it wasn’t Herod’s kid, then things were about to turn ugly. The Wisemen didn’t see this risk at all, which is why they almost fell for Herod’s plea that when they found the child, they should return and tell him where the baby was. Finally, there were the religious authorities. What was obvious to them was where this baby was to be born. You could almost hear them going, “Duh, everyone knows where the messiah is to be born. He is to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. In the city of David. Didn’t you guys go to Sabbath school?”

What is fascinating about this story and about the way that Matthew tells it, is that each of these characters could see something obvious that the others couldn’t see and yet, even when they put all their obvious insights together, they missed what ought to be obvious to us, that this coming king, to be born in Bethlehem, was not what any of them expected. He was to be an

alternative kind of king who ruled over an alternative kind of kingdom. What I mean by this is that Jesus was born to be a king who came not to seek power but to live as a servant. Jesus was born to be a king who came not to condemn but to forgive. Jesus was born to be a king who came not to seek vengeance but to bring about reconciliation. Jesus was born to be a king who came not to seek submission to himself but faithfulness to God. Jesus was born to be a king who came not to take life, but to save it. He was born to be a king whose kingdom reflected all of these alternative ways of being in community; of being God's people. His kingdom was to be unlike any other that had ever existed because it reflected the love of God that was poured forth into the world in his birth.

This insight, that Jesus came to be an alternative king in an alternative kingdom is what is supposed to be obvious to us, and yet I am afraid there have been and still are too many times when it is not. I say this because the church, the followers of Jesus, the people of God have not always acted as if they were part of an alternative kingdom. They and we, at times, have acted as if we are still part of Herod's political economy. I say this because the church, as soon as it got a taste of power under Constantine, in the early 300's, began to persecute those with whom it disagreed. It organized itself as a powerbase that ultimately led to pogroms against Jews, to the slaughter of other Christians, Jews and Muslims during the crusades, to the forcible conversion of entire races in the New world, to slavery, to the burning of witches in New England and to the oppression of LGBTQ persons in our day and time. It was as if every time that the people of God found a way to grab hold of power, they used it just as Herod would have, rather than as Jesus would have. They forgot that they were to be an alternative community who followed an alternative king.

Today we begin a new sermon series entitled, Being God's People. Over the next five weeks we will look at five critical components of what it means to be a citizen of the alternative kingdom ruled by an alternative king. We are doing this because we still live in Herod's world in which it is not always obvious what it means to live as God's people. For this week, however I want to leave you with this challenge, to ask yourself, how does my life reflect that of the alternative King I have chosen to follow? How does my life reflect that alternative king of love, forgiveness, compassion and reconciliation?