

THREE RESPONSES TO THE CHILD

Matthew 2:1-12

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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Many of you are parents, a lot of you are grandparents, some of you are great-grandparents. Those of you who are not parents may be able to remember a time when a baby was born in your family. I suspect that for most of us, the birth of a new child in our family is a cause for rejoicing.

But not all people respond with great joy to the birth of a baby. If the child was conceived as a result of rape or incest, the mother's response to the birth of the baby is not likely to be ecstatic happiness. If the mother is an unmarried teenager, her family does not react with unqualified joy when her baby is born. If the baby's parents did not want this child, for whatever reason, they are probably not going to respond to the birth with great rejoicing. And those who are not related or closely connected to the new child are more likely to react with indifference or disinterest. People respond differently to the birth of a child, depending on how that child's birth affects them personally.

So it was with the birth of Jesus. From Matthew's account, we learn that there were three totally different responses to Jesus' birth---the response of King Herod, the response of Herod's advisers in Jerusalem and the townspeople in Bethlehem, and the response of the wise men.

King Herod responded in rage and fury. To understand why, we must understand Herod's position. He ruled over a diverse collection of peoples, including the Jews. He was in control, and he wanted to remain in control. So when he was told that a new ruler had been born in his territory who would become King over the Jews, Herod felt threatened and thus acted defensively. He was concerned about protecting his position of power, and anyone who threatened it had to be eliminated. So Herod ordered the execution of innocent children to make certain that the threat was stamped out.

There are Herods in our day who act the same way. They seek to maintain power by killing those who would take away their power. We think, of course, of Osama bin Laden and other terrorists and suicide-bombers who think nothing of killing innocent children in order to stay in control. We also think of the drug dealers on our city streets and even in the suburbs, whose primary victims are children and teenagers.

Then there are the American cigarette companies, that spend almost \$42 million a day on advertising, promoting an agent of death among our children. [Federal Trade Commission figure for 2005, according to "Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids" web page] And this advertising is very successful, enticing between 80,000 and 99,000 children and adolescents to begin smoking every day, thus beginning for them a life of addiction which usually leads to lung cancer and early death. [World Health Organization, on "Tobacco Control Factsheets" web page, 2008]

But we Americans have refused to stand up to the tobacco industry, thus continuing to allow innocent children to be sacrificed on the altar of power, or greed. I applaud Wegmans, Dash's, and Target for their decision to stop selling tobacco products. But most

of our society is not yet fully committed to tackling the power of the Herods in our midst. Herod responded to the child by killing.

The second response to Jesus' birth was the reaction of Herod's advisers in Jerusalem and the townspeople in Bethlehem---indifference, or disinterest. Now Herod's advisers were the chief priests and scribes of the Jewish people, and they knew that according to Hebrew prophecy the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But they did not go to Bethlehem to see whether this baby might indeed be the long-awaited Messiah. At least, we have no indication that any of them went to check out the reports that the Messiah had been born. It seems they didn't care enough to go.

We see this same attitude of disinterest among the townspeople of Bethlehem. You would think that the unusual events surrounding Jesus' birth would have gotten their attention: the exceptionally bright star in the sky immediately over the town, the reports from shepherds that they had seen and heard a choir of angels in the sky just outside the village, and the very important visitors who came from the East bearing expensive gifts for the child. But nowhere in either Matthew's account of Jesus' birth or Luke's account is there the slightest hint that the people living in Bethlehem took any interest at all in the birth of this child. They weren't negative; they just weren't interested.

And so it is today among many unchurched people in our community. They haven't consciously rejected Jesus; they just aren't interested in him. Their response to the child is indifference. This attitude of "Who cares?" is particularly true of baby-boomers. According to one study, 70% of all baby-boomers are not connected with any religious group. Many of our neighbors in this community---and perhaps some members of our own families---are in this category. They respond to the child by ignoring him.

Maybe even some of our church members are indifferent, though at one time they were interested enough to be confirmed and join the church. Perhaps they feel that church membership has more to do with rights and privileges than with responsibilities and commitment. Their names appear on our church rolls, but their response to the child seems to be indifference. They respond by ignoring.

But there is a third response to the child---the response of the wise men. These astrologers had been searching the sky for signs of something significant about to occur in their world. They saw the sign they had been looking for: a bright star. They followed it, found the child, knelt before him in worship, and gave him gifts---expensive gifts---gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But why did these men respond so differently to the Christ-Child than did Herod or the townspeople? Perhaps it was because the wise men had a different set of values. Herod valued his own privileged position of power. He did not want the status quo disturbed. Herod's advisers and the townspeople valued their traditions and the predictability of their lives. They did not want to get involved or to deal with the possibility of change.

The wise men, on the other hand, were not trying to hang onto power or to preserve traditions. They were looking for truth. And they were willing to travel a long way to a foreign country to find it. When you are looking for truth, it does not matter where it comes

from. It may even come to you from an alien culture in the form of a child.

We call these astrologers wise because they did not allow arrogance, or fear, or power, or indifference, to blind them to the truth. They recognized the truth when they saw it, even though it was in the form of a Jewish baby. Having found the One who later said, "I am the truth," they knelt before him in worship. To them, this child was not a threat to their power or wealth or learning, but rather was the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams. They recognized this child as a gift from God, not just to the Jewish people, but to the whole world. This child was the truth they had been seeking. So the wise men, who valued truth above all else, worshiped the child with expensive gifts. They responded to the child by worshiping.

And what about us in our day? What do we value? Do we value maintaining the status quo, protecting our position of privilege and power, even at the risk of killing innocent children? Or do we value hanging onto our traditions and our predictable lifestyles, even at the risk of ignoring the child? Or, do we value truth, even if that truth challenges what we believe, and the way we live, and the way we have always done things? Do we see in this child the eternal truth of God? Are we willing to kneel before the child in worship? And to offer him costly gifts?

Three responses to the child---killing, ignoring, worshiping. Clearly, from your presence here, you have chosen the third response, worshiping. But the question remains: What can you do to help lead those who have chosen one of the other responses to change their response and to join us and the wise men in worshiping the child?