

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 22, 2013)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: SING A SONG OF CHRISTMAS

## Joy to the World!

(Matthew 2, Luke 1, 2)

Study #3

### Introduction: Governments we have known and loved...

Winston Churchill is credited with the line, *“Democracy is the worst form of government - except for all the other forms of government that have been tried.”*

Churchill was certainly biased toward democracy, just as everyone is biased toward one model of government or another.

Throughout history, people have tried out all sorts of governmental models. Most of them have been formed with the best of intentions. But, over time, they all fail.

The failure of governments is inevitable because of the inescapable detail of sin. Whether we are talking about democracy, or socialism, communism or fascism, or various forms of authoritarianisms like dictatorships and monarchies, caliphates and modern theocracies, they will all fail because the people leading those governments are sinners.

Even if it is doomed to failure, though, government is necessary. There is no question that the worst possible state for a society is anarchy (no government). Nobody wins when nobody is in charge.

But there is debate about the best possible state for a society. For myself, and with apologies to Sir Winston, I firmly believe that the best of all possible forms of government, the government under which we would all love to live, is the benevolent dictatorship.

I'm just saying that the best of all possible worlds would be to live under the reign of a really good ruler who had the power to do the good he wanted to accomplish.

Throughout history, we have had lots of rulers with lots of power. And some of these rulers have been good.

The problem, of course, is that every good ruler who has ever lived has only been partly good. Every ruler is saddled with the same propensity toward sin and foolishness that all the rest of us also are. And no ruler, no matter how good, has ever had the absolute power he would need to accomplish perfectly good ends.

A monarchy is only as good as the monarch - and every monarch who has ever sat on a throne to this point has been a flawed man or woman.

As good as the best ones are, they are never as good as they need to be to perfectly enact justice and to perfectly dispense appropriate compassion. AND they are never powerful enough to do the good they would if they could.

But dream with me for a minute. Imagine a ruler who is **TOTALLY GOOD** and **TOTALLY POWERFUL**.

This ruler would put in place a legal system where all the laws are just. All those who break the laws would be appropriately and immediately punished. Those who keep the laws would have nothing to fear.

In this society there would be no discrimination, except on the basis of character and competency. Under this ruler, the weak would be protected. There would be peace in the streets. Women would feel safe alone at night. Children would be free from abuse and exploitation.

And there would be no fear from outside invasion because, again, the ruler is not only all **GOOD**, he is all **POWERFUL**. Who would dare attack that?!

Well, when that Dictator, that Totalitarian Ruler, that Despot, when that King comes to power, we'll all break out in song. We'll rejoice! And the song we just might sing is *“Joy to the World!”*

The song was written in 1719 by Sir Isaac Watts<sup>1</sup> and it is based, loosely, on Psalm 98, a psalm that speaks of the day when the ALL-GOOD, ALL-POWERFUL King, the One the Jews called “Messiah”, comes to reign.

Isaac Watts was famous for his work in reasoning and logic, as a theologian, and as a hymn-writer for the church. In fact, he is called the father of modern hymn-writing and wrote over 750 hymns, many of them still well-known today.<sup>2</sup>

Watts wrote the words to our song for today. The melody was written by George Frederick Handel and was arranged by Lowell Mason. As of the last counting, “*Joy to the World*” was still among the most popular and the most-frequently published Christmas hymns in North America.

Since the song for this morning’s reflection on Christmas is “*Joy to the World*” you might reasonably expect that the message will be all about joy.

Good thought - and we will get to joy. But if you listened carefully to the words of the song we just sang, you noted that JOY isn’t the big idea of “*Joy to the World*.” Joy is a by-product of the big idea of the song.

And the big idea of the song and of the message today is this: The Baby whose birth we celebrate, the Baby who was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, Jesus, was that ALL-GOOD and ALL-POWERFUL King we’ve always longed for.

Today, our thoughts swing to the Lordship of King Jesus!

Around the time of Jesus’ birth, there were several people and groups of people who recognized Jesus’ Lordship. Their responses varied, but by their responses there is no question that they “got it.” They knew that the Baby Jesus was the King.

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<sup>1</sup> His father, Isaac Watts, Sr., was imprisoned twice for his non-conformist (but by today’s standards, solidly evangelical) beliefs.

<sup>2</sup> Among them “O God Our Help in Ages Past” and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “I Sing the Mighty Power of God.”

One of those who “got it” was Herod the Great, the Roman-backed king of Israel. Herod was convinced of Jesus’ kingship and opposed Him from day one for precisely that reason.

### **King Jesus Opposed by King Herod**

#### **Herod, the King**

As I mentioned last Sunday, this Herod (there were several mentioned in the New Testament) was the one we refer to as Herod the Great. He reigned as king from 40 BC until shortly after the birth of Jesus (around 4 AD).

Herod was a wealthy, politically gifted, very skilled administrator.

He oversaw the construction of the magnificent Herodian Temple in Jerusalem along with lots of other building projects. Early in his reign, he dealt well with a severe famine that had hit Israel.

But, for all of his governing skill, history remembers Herod as a man who, above all else, loved power. He did anything necessary to hold on to his power.

He had two of his own sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, killed because he was suspicious that they were trying to usurp his throne (prompting Caesar Augustus to remark, “*It is better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.*”)

He had his wife killed along with several of his close associates and many others along the way, and all for the same reason. He dealt instantly and harshly with anyone who posed a threat to his power.

#### **Herod and the Baby Jesus (Matthew 2:3-8)**

*Wise men put Herod on high alert*

Well, one day, some wise men (magi) from the east came rolling into Jerusalem, looking for the king.

No, they weren’t looking for King Herod. Herod had been *appointed* king by Rome.

The magi wanted to know where they could find the one who had been “**BORN King of the Jews.**” They wanted to worship *that* King.

The BORN king always will replace the appointed king. And we can be certain that Herod the Great (not even a Jew himself!) was both panicked and furious at the news that there was one who had been BORN king!

With great understatement, the Bible says that Herod was troubled.

*Herod is troubled*

**[3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.**

And again, why was he troubled? It was because his power base was in jeopardy. The recently born Baby King was a threat.<sup>3</sup>

Well, Herod had not risen to the position of king by being passive. He was a man of action. So, he quickly put in place a plan of action to deal with this troubling news.

First, he had to locate the King and he did that by asking around to find out where the King would be born.

*Herod takes action*

#### Information gathering

And here is a curiosity. Even though he was the king of the nation of Israel, Herod was not familiar enough with the Hebrew Scriptures to have known the birthplace of the great Jewish Messiah/King.

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<sup>3</sup> It may appear that Herod’s rejection of Jesus and his attempts to kill Him were not so much of a rebellion against God as they were a simple human power grab; that they were not so much a spiritual battle over Jesus’ Lordship as a political power struggle. The spiritual battles of life rarely jump out at us and say, “*Boo! I am Satan. Choose me.*” Rather, there is usually a subtlety to the opposition against us. We may or may not recognize power struggles as spiritual battles. They are, nevertheless, essentially spiritual.

So, he called in the religious leaders of the day who did know.

**[5] They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: [6] ‘AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.’”**

Herod then called the *magi* into a closed chamber meeting, to find out when they had first seen the guiding star. They told him (it must have been months earlier), which let Herod know how old his infant rival was, and then Herod gave the magi a commission.

#### Herod’s Hate Commission (v. 8)

**[8] And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him.”**

Herod would have the chief priests, and the *magi*, and us believe that He wanted to join the *magi* for a worship service in honor of the BORN King. Not hardly! It was a trick to get the magi to tell him where the King was so that he could kill Him.

When Herod learned that the *magi* had tricked him and had gone back home without telling him where the “BORN King” was, he went ballistic.

*Herod slays the innocents (vv. 16-18)*

**[16] Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. [17] Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: [18] “A VOICE WAS HEARD IN RAMAH, WEEPING AND GREAT MOURNING, RACHEL WEEPING FOR HER CHILDREN; AND SHE REFUSED TO BE COMFORTED, BECAUSE THEY WERE NO MORE.”**

At earlier periods in his life, there were actions Herod took which resulted in greater numbers of people being killed than were killed here in the slaughter of the innocent babies.

We know that on at least one occasion, he killed 3,000 people in a fit of suspicious rage, many more than were killed in his attempt to kill Jesus.

However, for sheer, wicked, hateful power-mongering, this is as bad as it gets. He sought to kill Jesus solely because he knew that Jesus was a king.

Herod is the ultimate example of the ruthless hunger for power run amuck. He is the epitome of the spirit that refuses at all costs to submit to the sovereignty of King Jesus.

Our song for today urges us to worship King Jesus:

*Joy to the World, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her King;  
Let every heart prepare Him room*

...and Herod would have nothing of it. There was only room in Herod's heart for one king: himself. And his response to Jesus illustrates one way any of us might respond to the good news of the arrival of a Sovereign King.

- Protect personal sovereignty.
- Refuse to submit and stiffen the neck; harden the heart.
- Do away with competition by whatever means necessary.
- Keep "king self" on the throne.

All sure-fire means of ensuring that JOY never comes to your soul.

Herod warns us of the danger of clinging to personal sovereignty so tenaciously that we miss the true Sovereign, and so miss out on joy.

But there were others who recognized Jesus' Kingship and responded differently. Some knew that Jesus was the King and revealed in that truth.

Let's consider those magi.

### **King Jesus Honored by Magi**

#### **The "Who's" and "What's" of the Magi**

The term *magi* refers to the soothsayers and magicians and astrologers who made up the official priesthood of the ancient Parthian Empire, located far to the east of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

These *magi* were the descendants of the *magicians* over whom the prophet Daniel ruled when he lived in Persia under Darius the Mede six hundred years earlier.<sup>5</sup>

By the time of Jesus' birth, the function of the *magi* in the Parthian Empire had evolved from a purely religious one (sorcerer, court magician, royal astrologer) to a religious/political mix.<sup>6</sup>

And one of the defining jobs of the *magi* was to select, using both astrology and astronomy, the king who would sit on the Parthian throne.

When we turn to Matthew 2 we read that some of these *magi* "king-makers" have made their way from Parthia to Palestine, the land of the Jews.

#### **Magi in Jerusalem, Seeking a King**

*[1] Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> The powerful Parthian Empire from which the *magi* came was located to the east of the farthest reach of the Roman Empire.

<sup>5</sup> Do we wonder why pagan *magi* such as those we find here in Matthew 2 might have been studying the Hebrew Scriptures? More than likely, they had first had exposure to them through the life and ministry of Daniel.

<sup>6</sup> There were some things about the *magi* that were commendable (they were essentially monotheistic in their world view), but no one will deny that they practiced many pagan rituals in their worship system.

<sup>7</sup> One author describes the arrival of the *magi* on the scene in this way, "In Jerusalem the sudden appearance of the *Magi*, probably traveling in force with all imaginable oriental pomp, and accompanied by adequate cavalry escort to insure their safe penetration of Roman territory, certainly alarmed Herod and the populace

Because of the three gifts mentioned later in the passage, we usually assume that there were three *magi*, but Scripture doesn't tell us how many *magi* arrived in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

The only thing Matthew mentions is that the *magi* came from the east to Israel, and that they came *after* Jesus' birth.

So, what brought these politically powerful Parthian king-makers to Jerusalem? We've heard it already today. Let's listen to them again.

*The "why" of the Magi's travels (v. 2)*

**[2] "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."**

The *magi* had been led through their studies of the constellations - and one exceptional star in particular - to expect a Jewish king to be born near the city of Jerusalem.

They weren't curiosity seekers. They have come for one purpose: to worship the King.

When they left king Herod to find King Jesus, they soon found themselves in Bethlehem, at the home of Jesus and Joseph and Mary.

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of Jerusalem, as is recorded by Matthew. It would seem as if these *Magi* were attempting to perpetrate a border incident which could bring swift reprisal from Parthian armies. Their request of Herod regarding him who "***has been born king of the Jews***" was a calculated insult to him who had contrived and bribed his way into that office." Such a description helps us to understand why this power-loving king was troubled at the news of the *magi*.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, church tradition assigns to the *magi* the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. But that is assumption built on assumption.

<sup>9</sup> One of the fascinating details of Matthew's Gospel, a book written to highlight Jesus' royalty, is that the phrase "***The King of the Jews***" is found only here in this passage on the lips of the pagan *magi*, and then again at the end of His life as a Roman accusation on the upright of the cross on which He was killed. In fact, most of the times in Scripture where Jesus is referred to as the King of the Jews, it is spoken in derision (Mk. 15:2, 9, 12, 18, 26; Luke 23:3, 37-38; John 18:33, 39; 19:3, 19, 21).

*The Magi found Jesus (vv. 9-11)*

In the home of Jesus (v. 11a)

**[9] After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. [11a] And coming into the house they saw the Child<sup>10</sup> with Mary His mother...**

Jesus, the Child, not the Infant, is at least several months old at this point, perhaps as old as two years.

Some undefined period of time has elapsed between that night when the shepherds saw Jesus lying in a manger (Luke 2), and now, when the wise men see Him in a home.

So, yes, it is true. The *magi* never showed up at Bethlehem's stables.

The manger scenes we grew up with, and which dot our neighborhoods showing the wise men there with the animals, and that wonderful movie ("The Nativity Story") have it all wrong. The wise men weren't there at the stables for Jesus' birth. (sorry if that messes with you...)

But here, in a home somewhere in Bethlehem, there is this tranquil scene of Jesus with His mother, Mary. The *magi* have finally found the King they were seeking!

At the feet of Jesus

**[11b]...and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him...**

Picture the scene and it just might make you squirm. Here are grown men, powerful political figures from a refined culture, prostrate on the ground in front of a Toddler.

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<sup>10</sup> The word used to describe Jesus here (*child*; Greek - *paidios*) is not the same as the word for a newborn infant (Greek - *brephos*).

As soon as they entered the home of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, they threw decorum to the wind, and in an act of total un-self-consciousness, fell down to worship the Child Jesus.

It seems sacrilegious - and it is idolatrous - if the Baby is not who we claim He is. If, though, Jesus is God in the flesh, it makes perfect sense that *magi* - or you and I - would fall to the ground and worship Him.

After bowing before the Infant King, the *magi* gave Him the gifts they had brought with them.

Christmas gift-giving, 101 (v. 11c)

*[11c]...They, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

- They gave Him gold, the universal standard currency, a valuable commodity in any culture.
- They gave Him frankincense, a fragrant perfume.
- They presented Him with myrrh, an aromatic balm, derived from the resin of a plant that grows in Arabia.<sup>11</sup>

And, with the giving of the gifts, the worship service for which they had traveled all this distance was over.

They grasped what our song tells us, that this King would change everything. He would bring blessing to all people everywhere. They saw that because of this Toddler King a day would come when *sins and sorrows would no longer grow, when thorns would no longer infest the ground.*

*This Child's blessings will flow as far as the curse is found!*

So, Herod tried to kill Jesus because He was the King. For the exact same reason the magi worshipped Him.

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<sup>11</sup> Myrrh, was one of the spices used in the embalming process, and was no doubt used to embalm Jesus. The irony of an element of His embalming being one of His presents here has frequently been noted.

These *magi* were powerful men. But they knew a greater power when they saw it and responded just as you should in the presence of a King.

Others recognized him, too.

Herod was of the race of Esau and the magi were Parthians. But there are also Jews who recognized Him. These Jew who had long anticipated the promised ALL-GOOD and ALL-POWERFUL King, knew something of what He would bring. They were eager for His reign. And when they saw Him for who He was, even as a Baby, they simply rejoiced!

King Jesus Brings Joy to His People

**Listen to Mary! (Luke 1:46-55)**

Last Sunday we heard Mary's heroic words, *[Luke 1:38] "Behold the bonds slave of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."*

Well, Mary had something else to say a little later on. When she went to stay with her relative, Elizabeth, during the early part of her pregnancy, Elizabeth's baby, John, jumped in the womb.

Mary responded with unfettered joy!

*[46] And Mary said:*

*"My soul exalts the Lord,*

*[47] And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*

*[48] "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bonds slave; For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.*

*[49] "For the Mighty One has done great things for me; And holy is His name.*

*[50] "AND HIS MERCY IS UPON GENERATION AFTER GENERATION TOWARD THOSE WHO FEAR HIM.*

*[51] "He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.*

*[52] "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, And has exalted those who were humble.*

*[53] "HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS; And sent away the rich empty-handed.*

**[54] “He has given help to Israel His servant,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
[55] As He spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and his descendants forever.”**

Her pregnancy was a tremendous disruption to her life, yet she saw in her Son the One who would bless Israel and the whole world - so she rejoiced.

#### **Listen to Simeon! (Luke 2:29-32)**

Then, there was an old man, Simeon, too, who had been waiting his whole life to see the Messiah, the great King.

When God revealed that the baby in Mary’s arms was that King, Simeon rejoiced.

**[29] Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace,  
According to Your word;  
[30] For my eyes have seen Your salvation,  
[31] Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
[32] A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES,  
And the glory of Your people Israel.”**

Simeon saw in Jesus the fulfillment of his hopes and dreams.

#### **Listen to Anna! (Luke 2:36-38)**

And then there was Anna. Anna had been married when she was a young woman. She and her husband lived together for seven years, and then, Anna’s husband died. She lived the rest of her life as a widow and when we meet her she is an elderly woman, eighty-four years old.

On the same day that Simeon rejoiced, Anna saw Jesus and somehow immediately knew that this Baby was the King.

**[38] At that very moment** (the moment when Simeon recognized Jesus as King) **she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him** (i.e. - Jesus!) **to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.**

#### **Conclusion:**

Our song says that the coming of Jesus brings joy.

Joy because the righteous, all-powerful, all-good King has come. Joy because Jesus, the Savior, reigns. Joy because He came to end the reign of sin. Joy because He rules the world with truth and grace.

And no, as you have noticed, we don’t see all of that now.

When Isaac Watts sat down to write the words of our song he was thinking of a time when Jesus would finally set all things right. But that time has not yet come.

The Bible tells us that when He came to earth, born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, He came to bear sin. The birth we celebrate at Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, and Jesus’ whole purpose was to live a perfect life and to die a perfect death to bring us forgiveness. (See Hebrews 9:27-28)

The Bible also tells us that Jesus is coming again. When He returns He will actually reign. He will be recognized for who He truly is - the King of kings and the Lord of all lords. (See Revelation 19)

Then, justice will cover the earth. Then, peace will reign. Love and mercy will flow. Then the weak will not be exploited and then He will reverse the curse.

And until that Day comes, our world is a wreck. There is injustice. There is war and strife. Joy is a scarce commodity and “*Joy to the World*” is a dream for the future.

Right now, King Jesus reigns *incognito*. And right now, the only way His reign is made manifest is when He reigns as King in the hearts of those He has redeemed.

When we enthrone King Jesus, submitting to Him as subjects submit to their Sovereign, people will sit up and take notice.

Your family will see you giving priority to prayer. They will hear you increasingly sprinkle your conversation with thoughts of God and His ways. Your wife, your husband, your kids, your parents, your siblings - they'll notice when you enthrone Jesus. You'll serve - without an attitude - and that'll be a dead giveaway that you're submitting to Jesus.

Your submission to the Lordship of Jesus will be evident at work. You will be honest. You'll refuse to gossip. You'll be committed to serious hard work. You'll speak of Jesus when you have the chance, and people will know you as someone they can trust.

Without a doubt, though, when we join the *magi* and Mary and Simeon and Anna and, recognizing Jesus for who He is, submit to His Lordship, we will manifest His reign by the way we love.

Those who follow King Jesus love.

No one ever loved the way Jesus loved. Start to finish, He showed what real love is all about by the way He interacted with friends and enemies, rich and poor, high and low.

Jesus taught that the two most important commandments ever given were to love God AND to love others. (Matthew 22:37-39) He said that the mark of a disciple is love for fellow Christians. (John 13:34-35)

The Apostle Paul - one who submitted to Jesus' Lordship if anyone ever did - said that exceptional eloquence, ultra-giftedness, encyclopedic knowledge, faith, generosity, and self-sacrifice are worthless if not energized by love. (1 Corinthians 13).

So, this Christmas season, enjoy time with friends and family. Have great food. Travel safely. Give and receive with delight.

And allow the annual reminder of the birth of Jesus to prompt you to a proper response to the King.

God so loved the world that He gave His Son. And we, who have received the salvation the Son came to give, respond by worship and adoration, by submission and obedience - which means that we love.

Unleash the power of the King's reign by loving deeply, from the heart.

Put aside pleasant interaction rooted in self-interest. Love those who are nice to you and those who aren't. Seek to bless the one who wrongs you, just like your King did.

You'll say "Merry Christmas" loudest when you love the most courageously. And when you love like your King did, you bring joy to the world in His Name.

### **JOY TO THE WORLD!**

Joy to the World, the Lord is come!  
 Let earth receive her King;  
 Let every heart prepare Him room,  
 And Heaven and nature sing,  
 And Heaven and nature sing,  
 And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing.

Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!  
 Let men their songs employ;  
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains  
 Repeat the sounding joy,  
 Repeat the sounding joy,  
 Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
 Nor thorns infest the ground;  
 He comes to make His blessings flow  
 Far as the curse is found,  
 Far as the curse is found,  
 Far as, far as, the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,  
 And makes the nations prove  
 The glories of His righteousness,  
 And wonders of His love,  
 And wonders of His love,  
 And wonders, wonders, of His love.