

# ***Bethlehem, Not Jerusalem***

Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Epiphany

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."*

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (NRSV)*

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem.

Have you ever thought about the significance of that fact? Bethlehem was a small village of just a few hundred souls. The folks who lived out in Bethlehem were mostly farmers and small-time trades people. Life in Bethlehem was pretty simple and uncomplicated, where everyone knew everyone else and belonged to the same social and economic status—which is to say, they were all lower class peasants. It was among those ordinary people, in that insignificant village, where Jesus was born. In Bethlehem there were no kings, no palaces, and no great wealth. Bethlehem was not a center of power and influence. Out in Bethlehem, people's hands were rough and calloused.

By contrast, Jerusalem had a king—King Herod—along with a palace, a big temple complex, and a Roman military fortress. In comparison with tiny Bethlehem, Jerusalem was a big place, with perhaps tens of thousands of people. In

Jerusalem you could buy a wide variety of foods and luxury goods, if you had money. And at least some people did have money. King Herod certainly had money; the high priest and his family members probably had money; assorted merchants and government officials, most likely had money too. Jerusalem was a city of power and influence. Important decisions affecting the whole land were made there in Jerusalem. Up in Jerusalem, people's hands were pampered and bejeweled.

If Jesus had been born in Jerusalem, what symbolic importance would we now attach to that? Suppose Jesus had been born in Herod's palace, the son or grandson of Herod himself. Imagine that the Son of God had grown up wearing fine linen clothes, with rubies on his fingers and sapphires in his hat, feasting every day on sumptuous food prepared by the most talented chefs. Picture him receiving private tutoring from the best teacher in the land. If Jesus had grown up as a prince in the palace, he would have belonged to the elite of the world. He would have been used to the finer things of life. He would have been a specialist in the art of political intrigue. His twelve disciples would perhaps have been members of the upper class. If all this had happened, how would you now interpret the meaning of his life? How would that have shaped the message of salvation? How would you now define healing and hope?

Or if you like, imagine what might have been different if Jesus had been born into the household of the chief high priest. In this scenario, Jesus would have been destined to become the chief high priest himself one day, because the office of high priest was often hereditary. As a high priest in training, he would have studied the Mosaic laws in minute detail. He would have been required to learn all the rituals of temple worship: how to sacrifice lambs and goats, pigeons and calves; what words to speak at each point in the liturgy; where to stand on the floor of the temple at each point during the sacrifices, and so on. The high priests

also led a somewhat pampered life of good food, clothes, and privilege. If Jesus had grown up as a priest in the thick of temple worship, what theological significance would you attach to his life?

Of course Jesus grew up neither as a prince nor a priest, but as a peasant. His food consisted of ingredients like barley bread and lentils. His clothes were woven from rough wool or goat's hair. His hands were cracked and calloused. He was born not in one of the centers of power, but on the periphery of power.

It matters very much where Jesus was born. On this day of Epiphany, we mark the appearance, the revealing, the manifestation, of Jesus to the world. How and where Jesus appeared to the world significantly influences our interpretation of his life. The difference between Bethlehem and Jerusalem was a little like the difference between Foraker and Indianapolis. A Messiah born the governor's mansion in Indianapolis would come across as quite different from a Messiah born in Foraker.

In a little bit we will take communion together. As we do this, I invite you to meditate on the facts of our Messiah's life—that he was born in Bethlehem, multiplied bread for the hungry, offered health care for the sick, hung out with sinners, made peace with the violent, and died shamefully on a cross. This is the Jesus whom we follow. This is the Jesus whom we worship. This is the Jesus whom we will one day meet in God's eternal future.