

Kerra Becker English

“Who Is The New King?”

January 1, 2016

Matthew 2:1-12; Psalm 72:1-14

Chairman of the Republican National Committee Reince Priebus has probably been wishing this week that he had a more theologically astute copy-editor to look over the Christmas message he sent out on behalf of the party. It's tricky enough to send out a “Merry Christmas” in a religiously pluralistic nation, so I give him credit for trying, but unfortunately it was written in such a way as to invite some ambiguities that had him scrambling to explain his intent. It started out with a nice head nod to Star Wars fans gearing up to go out and see “Rogue One.” He said, “Over two millennia ago, a new hope was born into the world.” Not so different from, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away” the introduction that launched the whole Star Wars series with a New Hope.

But after that his words got away from him. And it's those little words that will really get ya! Knowing the story of the birth of Christ, particularly from his Greek Orthodox background, he wrote, “Just as the three wise men did on that night, *this Christmas* heralds a time to celebrate the good news of a new King.” Excuse me. Back that one up a bit. Who is the new king that he's talking about? Given that he has been selected to be the President-Elect's chief of staff, it kind of sounds like he might be talking about the changing of the executive office in Washington, D.C. At least that's what some heard in his message. Perhaps he's subtly indicating that Donald Trump is the new King. Well after that interpretation started going around, Priebus was quick to remind folks that the good news of a new King is something that Christians celebrate EVERY YEAR with the birth of Christ, but since he said specifically “this year,” it raised a few eyebrows just as it raised for me what really is a key question for those of us who make claims about the uniqueness of Jesus' birth. Who is the new King? And what exactly is it that we are doing to celebrate the arrival of Christ the King in this particular year?

Many of the critics of his message stopped their quote at the end of that sentence so they could get their digs in, but even if those words catch a bit and I must say they did for me, it's helpful to consider what Reince Priebus wrote next in his message. He said, “Even as we celebrate, we must remember those among us who are less fortunate. Many on this day are without hope, and need the kindness and compassion of those around them. It is our prayer we will rise to meet the material, emotional and spiritual needs of individuals all around us, and what better day is there to love our fellow man than today?” Now those two sentences make me think he is familiar with the message of Christ's birth into the world and not just placating those who want to make sure that the Christian message is the one heard loudest and clearest among other holiday messages.

I find that sentiment quite similar to the prayer for support and guidance for the new King that I read from Psalms this morning. The King's job is to judge the peoples with righteousness

and the poor with justice. It is to give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor. It is to remember when thinking about those less fortunate that their blood is also precious in the sight of those with power. The kings who were written about in Old Testament writings were far from perfect, but their performance was judged based on some specific criteria. How well did they do in caring for all their subjects – not just the ones that could render them tribute and bring them gifts?

But that's never been easy to do for a person wielding so much power. Kings have typically been known for doing quite the opposite, offering favors to those who have something to give back, exploiting the poor, failing to dismantle convenient injustices, and looking the other way from critiquing oppressive forces. This is the danger one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, saw in the creation of a powerful executive office. Over time, he thought that power concentrated could lead to the re-creation of a monarchy that he was willing to risk his life to stand against. The Declaration of Independence clearly and boldly outlined the rejection of such power that King George wielded over the colonies, and in a letter he wrote later to his young legal protégée Archibald Stewart about the creation of a Constitution for the state of Virginia, he writes,

Tho' the experiment has not yet had a long enough course to shew us from which quarter incroachments are most to be feared, yet it is easy to foresee from the nature of things that the incroachments of the state governments will tend to an excess of liberty which will correct itself (as in the late instance) while those of the general government will tend to monarchy, which will fortify itself from day to day, instead of working it's own cure, as all experience shews. I would rather be exposed to the inconveniencies attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it.

(<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-22-02-0410>)

Now this is may be more of an American history review than sermonizing, but it doesn't hurt to be reminded of why the idea of a new American King should leave a sour taste in our mouths. Jefferson, and others like him, were willing to concede that the problems that come with too much liberty would be preferable to those that come with federal powers that could shut down the freedoms promised to individuals. That said, certain ideals have been woven into the fabric of our republic that we once considered to be self-evident, that all are created equal, and all ought to be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those are ideals that American history has also shown to be more true for some than others. We haven't been so good at acting these out in a way that has been justice FOR ALL. So again, we are reminded that even democratically given power can corrupt, and the prayer for the new King, or rather any newly elected leader must also include the frequent reminder that he or she be the protector of the most vulnerable in society if that person is to do their job well.

Therefore, we now come to the promise of a Messianic Kingdom, a Kingdom not of this world, the rise of a new King that exemplifies these ideals to their fullest and breaks the mold of even the very best of our earthly Kings. Christ's Kingdom won't be like Herod's Kingdom. Of that, you can be sure. Christ's Kingdom is a threat to Kingdoms like Herod's that are built on power and an ego that demands death and destruction at the risk of losing any power. Herod was willing to use the wise men as pawns in his quest to quash the rise of a new King of the Jews. Be reminded that Herod's request to "pay homage" to this new King was a lie, and that after he

found out where Jesus had been born, he authorized the slaying of infants and toddlers who “might” fit Jesus’ description to try and wipe out this threat to his power.

No, Christ’s Kingdom is the one that lifts up the lowly and takes the powerful down from their thrones, that fills the poor, and sends the rich away empty. Christ’s Kingdom is built upon justice, and righteousness, and love. We too are called to be a part of this Kingdom, not as subjects, but as full participants. Now if only the second part of Priebus’ statement was the one that got the prime media coverage! Let’s be the ones who remember to live up to his prayer rather than remember him for his blunder. “Even as we celebrate,” he said, “we must remember those who are less fortunate.” Let’s share his prayer that together we will rise to meet the material, spiritual, and emotional needs of ALL the people ALL around us. Perhaps God is using Reince Priebus’ message not so much to share a public “Merry Christmas” to America than it is to send out an accidental Epiphany about who this new King truly is. Amen.

Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘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^[d] my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Psalm 72:1-14

Prayer for Guidance and Support for the King

- ¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
- ² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.
- ³ May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.
- ⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

- ⁵ May he live^[a] while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
- ⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.
- ⁷ In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

- ⁸ May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
- ⁹ May his foes^[b] bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust.
- ¹⁰ May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
- ¹¹ May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.

- ¹² For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
- ¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
- ¹⁴ From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.