

King of the Jews

Matthew 21:1-11

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We have been planning a trip to the Holy Land for the summer of 2020. (Surprise, surprise, we have had to reschedule. Now we will travel in the summer of 2021) Taking the advice of a trusted friend who has taught the Old Testament in a Presbyterian Seminary, I recommended to our group that we read James Michener's novel of historical fiction that centers on an archaeological dig in the Holy Land. My friend, the Old Testament professor, suggested the book, saying although it is historical fiction, it would give us a sense of all the different layers and levels of society and people and religions and wars and human development that have taken place in the Holy Land. Michener's book of historical fiction about an archaeological dig in the Holy Land is titled *The Source*.

The Source is a long book. The copy I am holding is 1088 pages and the type is small. I get it that it takes a while to describe the levels of civilization buried in a twelve-thousand-year span of history. I get it. But at the same time, I think it is safe to say that in *The Source*, this work of historical fiction focusing on archaeology, James Michener literally leaves no stone unturned. So our group read about the beginnings, about the practices of religion, about the development of agriculture and with it the sacrifices associated with fertility cults, sacrifices meant to please the gods of nature and assure a good harvest, and we learned about other sacrifices, sacrifices that were not benign, sacrifices that were brutal, the sacrifice of children. We learned of the turbulent history of Israel as the Jewish people rose in prominence and then struggled through times of exile, living under foreign rule. There was perhaps no rule as oppressive as Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who ran roughshod over the Jewish people and their sacred religion. Many of the chapters in *The Source* required the gift of perseverance to push on through. But there was always a ray of sunlight that kept us going. For you see, after 400 pages of *The Source*, we knew we would come to the chapter titled, "King of the Jews." We could not wait to get to "King of the Jews."

We saw the title "King of the Jews" and could not wait to get to the chapter about Jesus. In the gospel of Matthew, the wise men from the east come in search of "The **king** of the Jews." (Matthew 2:1-6). We know the king they came in search of was the baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem. When Jesus enters Jerusalem on this day we are celebrating today, the day we call Palm Sunday, Matthew wants us to know the triumphal entry was in fulfillment of the prophecy Zechariah made so long ago, "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your **king** comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" (Matthew 21:5) In one of his most famous parables, the parable in Matthew 25 about the sheep and the goats, a powerful

parable that shows how Jesus is intimately connected to the least ones in our world, to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner, Jesus tells the parable in such a way that there is no mistaking that he, Jesus, the Son of Man, will be the King who makes the judgments at the end of time. “Then the **King** will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father...’” (Matthew 25:31-46) Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the **king** of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Yes, it is as you say.” (Matthew 27:11) And when he was hung on the cross a sign hung there with him saying, “This is Jesus, the **King** of the Jews.” (Matthew 27:37)

So, when we got to page 425 in *The Source*, the chapter titled, “King of the Jews”, we were so ready to read about Jesus. But we were shocked to learn the chapter was not about Jesus. James Michener did not tell us about Jesus when he told us about the king of the Jews. Thirty pages, all small type, thirty pages and not a word about Jesus. The chapter was about Herod, Herod the Great, Herod the king of the Jews who reigned from sometime around 37 BCE until roughly the time when Jesus was born. Herod reigned as the sole ruler of Judea and took the title basileus...or king. Herod rubbed shoulders with Antony and Cleopatra, with Caesar who succeeded Antony. Some of the finest ruins in the Holy Land are courtesy of Herod, including the ancient city of Caesarea, a magnificent city built near the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Herod was an astute political figure. The city is named Caesarea in honor of Caesar Augustus. If you want to win favor with Caesar, build him a big and beautiful city and name it after him. Herod built the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the magnificent temple that lasted until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The stories of Jesus when he was in Jerusalem are all set in the period of the Second Temple, the time of Herod’s Temple. Although the temple was destroyed one wall from that second temple remains. It is the section of the wall known as the Western Wall, or the Wailing Wall, a most sacred and special spot for countless visitors who make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Herod ruled as King for many years. Herod commanded armies. Herod had access to vast riches. Herod had power. Herod had influence. Herod left a mark, a lasting mark. James Michener was right. Herod was King of the Jews.

Not that any of us who were reading *The Source* had a degree in the ancient history of the Holy Land, but we all knew Jesus was not literally the King of the Jews, at least not in the sense that history records kings. And yet we were right in our own way in expecting the chapter about the King of the Jews to be about Jesus. But give Michener credit. He did not make a mistake and he did not misstate the facts when he wrote about the King of the Jews and chose to focus on Herod the Great.

Reading about Herod the Great caused what might be described as an unintended consequence. By not reading about Jesus, and by reading about Herod the Great, his armies, his ego, his architecture, his impact, I found myself humbled in new ways at the kingdom Jesus came to bring. The kingdom of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, is so different than the kingdom Herod ruled. The kingdom of Jesus is a kingdom of justice and a kingdom of peace. The kingdom of Jesus is a kingdom where all the subjects of the king are held in high esteem. Using the analogy of a shepherd Jesus said, "I know my sheep by name. If one gets lost, I will come searching." Jesus did not rule in a kingdom where his subjects were disposable, traded out or trafficked, sacrificed as pawns or treated as if they were expendable. Twice Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What kingdom do you know that belongs to the poor? Not Herod's. Not any other we have ever known. But the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor, both the ones who are literally poor and suffering from poverty, and the poor in spirit, those who are downhearted and downcast. And in what kingdom does the king lay down his life for his subjects, for his servants, for his people?

Reading the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John you will learn so much about the King we know as Jesus, and about the peaceable kingdom he came to bring. The gospels portray a kingdom of love and a kingdom of light. Today, along with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the branch waving throng who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna, there is another testimony about our king named Jesus, and the kingdom he came to bring, the kingdom where he reigns in eternal glory. It is a short section in Philippians chapter 2, only six verses in all. Many believe these six verses were a hymn the early church sang.

It is a hymn about Jesus. It is a hymn celebrating Jesus. In that sense it is a hymn for our king. Perhaps as well as any other passage in the bible, these six verses in Philippians tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about our king, the one we know as Christ Jesus, "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:6-11 Revised Standard Version) That hymn from Philippians captures perfectly the words of Jesus when he said, "If you want to be great in the kingdom of heaven, learn to be the servant of all." Jesus was the servant of all. And now Jesus is exalted to the highest place and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. What a glorious kingdom! What a glorious King!

One Palm Sunday, sometime around 1988 or 1989, on a youth choir tour proclaiming the good news of great joy that God gave to this earth when he sent Jesus to be our King, our youth choir worshiped in a church near San Diego, California. The pastor, an older, more reserved pastor, certainly a man of great dignity, got up to preach to more than 100 high school and college students. That pastor preached a simple sermon for us that day. And yet as simple as it was, the sermon has been one I have not, nor will I ever forget. Over and over again that reserved and dignified pastor said these words, "It was the King who died." Oh, he said other things about Jesus, beautiful things about Jesus, inspiring things about Jesus, but no matter what he said, his words never ended without adding, "It was the King who died." That Jesus died is a beautiful gift from the God who loves this world so much he gave his One and Only Son. That Jesus, who died, is our King...how can we ever grasp the amazing love God has given us, the amazing love Jesus has given us. Charles Wesley wrote, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou my God, shouldst die for me." It was the King, it was our King, who died. Amazing love...Amazing love...Amazing love

James Michener gives some thirty pages in *The Source* to Herod the Great, King of the Jews. James Michener gives Herod his due, and rightly so. Herod left his mark. Some of his legacy still stands, even that sacred Western Wall. Give Herod his due. What about Jesus, the one we know as King? Around the same time our youth choir was traveling to San Diego so many years ago, there was a little reading inserted into our program. The reading from that program so many years ago captures the difference between king's like Herod, and the King named Jesus. The reading is titled, "One Solitary Life"

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nearly twenty centuries have come and gone, and today He is the centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of humans upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

That is why we wave palm branches and shout hosanna. That is why we fall down in worship and adoration. That one, solitary life, that life of the man named Jesus, has brought salvation and new life for this whole world. All Glory, Laud, and Honor to Jesus, he is our Redeemer...he is our King. Amen.