

“Knowing What to Do,” by Rev. Mark Caggiano, 1/11/26

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east, and have come to pay him homage."*

The magi, sometimes called kings and other times wise men, were from Persia. The name *magi* is the plural of the term *magus*, which comes into the English language as the word *magic* or *magician*. The magi were a caste of Persian priests known for their skills in subjects like astrology and the interpretation of dreams.

*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.*

King Herod, who was also not exactly a king but more an administrator appointed by the Romans, wanted to know where and when the messiah had been born. For you see, a messiah would have been someone able to challenge the Romans for control of the land of Israel, and not coincidentally, challenge the right of Herod to rule on the Romans' behalf. And he planned to use the magi to help him achieve his purposes.

*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."*

The magi visited Bethlehem. They met Mary and Joseph. They passed along their gifts of frankincense, myrrh, and gold. And then they left without reporting back.

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

What are we to make of all this? What are we to make of the behavior of the magi, the so-called three kings? These self-proclaimed wise men? These *betrayers* of Herod...

Betrayers of Herod – what's that again, you might well ask. Well, we were told that Herod was king. The king appointed by the ultimate ruler of Judea and Samaria, the emperor of Rome and his many, many legions. Those who came to control the land and its people through the only means necessary for that moment in history: force. Military force. Nothing more and nothing less.

And so, one might say in response that these three foreign interlopers came into the land, uninvited, and disobeyed a request by the rightful ruler of that land. And then they ran away. They refused to tell Herod where the threat to him was. Might that not be described as...*treacherous*?

Now, I am guessing, many of you do not recall the story of the birth of Jesus in that fashion. In that version, Herod would not be portrayed as the rightful ruler of anyone, and it was the magi who saved the life of Jesus and his family by warning, them causing them to flee into Egypt and away from the threat posed by Herod.

So, that leads me to ask a question: why is one version of the story bad while this other version is good?

The Romans were in charge. They were in charge because no one was powerful enough to say that they were not in charge. And they chose Herod to rule for them. There is even a passage in the Bible, Romans 13:1-3, that suggests this was indeed the right way of thinking:

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority?*

And if we are to understand Paul as being one who spoke with authority, someone who we should listen to, then why is it that Herod was in the *wrong* wanting to act as he saw fit as the rightful authority? How is it that we

know *he* was in the wrong but *other* forms of authority are worthy of our obedience? I will do my best to sort that out this morning.

But first, let me set the stage for our conversation. I wanted to talk about knowledge this morning, more specifically epistemology, which is the philosophical study of knowledge. It is not about how we are able to know things, like how our brains or our senses work. That is the study of psychology. Epistemology is more about how we might know the *right* things or the *right* way of knowing the difference. Because there are differences between words we use, like the difference between knowledge and the truth. Because knowledge is by no means the same as the truth.

For example, if I were to ask the question what the capital of the State of New York is, many of you would know the answer to be Albany. Most people from outside the United States might have guessed it was New York City, one of the largest and most recognizable cities in the U.S. It would be an understandable guess because, for example, Boston is the capital of Massachusetts and is the largest and most recognizable city in New England.

We might reason that the city of New York would be a good capital and analogize it to the example of Boston to prove the theory. But we would be wrong. Reason only takes us so far. Knowledge is not the same as truth. And reason is not the same as truth.<sup>1</sup>

Some religious folks look to the scriptures as the basis for organizing their life. Some believe that the Bible is absolutely true and entirely consistent. There are however numerous examples of the Bible being internally inconsistent. That does not mean that the Bible is wrong, but that it is a collection of different writings that were never intended to agree with each other.

The Bible is not one story, but many stories written by many different people across a thousand years of violent and complicated history. It was written about a time when Israel was a kingdom and about a time when it was a conquered land. At least five different empires ruled the area, and each one inspired varying responses. Sometimes they hated the empire in question, like the Babylonians, and sometimes they loved them, like the Persians. One of several messiahs mentioned in the Bible was Cyrus the Great, a Perian emperor, who defeated the Babylonians. Recall that “messiah” means anointed one and Cyrus was anointed, or proclaimed, by the people as their savior after the fact.

Thinking of the Bible as a book suggests a single coherent theme, but we know that is not true. The Hebrew scriptures are referred to as the Old Testament because the Greek scriptures known as the New Testament are said to be more true in a sense, at least for those calling themselves Christians, who treat it as the culmination of prophecies mentioned in Old Testament. That is a complex topic, but by definition, if you consider the New Testament to be the more important part of the Bible, then you might expect that there would be inconsistencies with the earlier parts of the Bible.

Inconsistencies about required behavior, which is why Christians do not follow many of the rules from the Book of Leviticus. Inconsistencies about the nature of God, because Christians generally believe that Jesus is the son of God, unlike anything suggested in the Hebrew scriptures.

And inconsistencies about authority. About who we should listen to as authorities over our lives. For example, God in the Hebrew scriptures directly states that having a king would be a terrible idea. He opposes the idea but gives up and lets the people of Israel crown a king named Saul.

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<sup>1</sup> For anyone interested, Albany became the state capital after the prior capital in Kingston was burned by the British in 1777. Rather than moving the capital to a coastal area, like New York City, the capital was moved to the more centrally located city of Albany which was also along the navigable Hudson River. This selection also had to do with balancing power so that one big city in the far south did not come to dominate the state as a whole, or at least that was the theory in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

And yet, Paul the Apostle tells us that we should obey those in authority: *For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.*

Is that true? Are rulers a terror to bad conduct rather than good conduct?

And if that idea raises any questions in your mind, why might Paul have written that down two thousand years ago? Bear in mind that he was writing to the church in Rome. And he did so after having been brought to the city of Rome to be tried for various crimes. Crimes like sedition, like disturbing the peace, like being a pest to the Romans and to religious leaders.

So, I might speculate on why he wrote that. I might speculate that Paul did not want to die. And therefore, he was trying to convince his followers to obey the authorities of Rome, and to stay out of trouble, while they were waiting for the return of Jesus. Because Paul clearly thought throughout much of his writings that Jesus was going to return during Paul's lifetime. And he wanted to live to see that event.

Did Paul *lie* to save his life? Not at all. Even Jesus famously said render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and render unto God that which is God's. I would personally disagree with Paul and his observation that authorities will always support the good and oppose the bad. And I also think it is entirely acceptable to prioritize the teachings of the Bible to reflect what we think is most important. Which is in part why I rarely preach on the writings of Paul.

For example, I strongly believe that the most important teaching of the Bible, without exception, is the Two-fold Commandment taught by Jesus: love God and love one another. That commandment is also consistent with much of the teachings from the Hebrew scriptures. That does not mean that every part of the Bible agrees with every other part. And therefore, we have to be able to sift through those teachings to maintain what is most important. To know what is true in the Bible rather than to know what was written in the Bible.

I have spoken about this in the past and I would recommend that anything that conflicts with or undermines the idea that we are to love God and to love one another, that idea should be deemphasized and maybe even placed aside. That is for many reasons, but first and foremost, I think it is because no one gets to overrule Jesus. Not Paul, not anyone. Jesus gets the first word and Jesus gets the last word. Follow Jesus. Always follow Jesus.

And if I am focusing on Jesus, then I cannot focus on Paul. If the ideas of Paul are in opposition to those of Jesus, then Paul gets placed aside. And the same would be true for any other part of the Bible. When they support Jesus, when they follow along with his teachings, that is great. And when they do not, sorry no thanks.

Back to this idea of following kings. Jesus said it was okay to pay taxes to the emperor. And so, I have no objection to paying taxes. Pretty straightforward.

This week was difficult in many respects. You might be aware that a woman, Renee Good, was killed in Minneapolis. There is a raging debate about what she was doing and why it happened. About what the immigration official who killed her should or should not have done. I have watched as my friends and total strangers have argued furiously online over this.

And our government and its officials have developed a habit. They have established a habit of declaring themselves to be absolutely right long before anyone could possibly know that that is the case. It is assumed that the authorities can do nothing wrong and that all suggestions to the contrary are themselves an attack on the government. That they are seditious. That they represent disturbances of the peace. Just like Paul. Just like Paul who did not want to die at the hands of the Romans.

It does not surprise me that people allow the authorities to have their way. Much like the story of King Herod, people know what might happen when those in power will do anything to get their way. Sometimes that means you have to get out of town, like the magi, like Mary and Joseph. Sometimes that means rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's because there is no other safe choice. I can understand that.

But that does not mean that Paul was right. That does not mean that worldly authority is given by God and therefore it must be obeyed. And it certainly does not mean that “*rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.*”

But you might rightly ask, how do I know that? How do I know that Paul is wrong? Because my friends, I am following my basic rule. Follow Jesus. Always follow Jesus.

But that brings up a troublesome question: what did Jesus do when he was accused of sedition, of disturbing the peace, of being a pest? He stood before the authorities and he stood before Pontius Pilate. He stood before them and then he went to his death rather than betray what he stood for. He died for what he believed even though he did nothing wrong. Which underscores that those in authority do not always incline to the good, unless you have a very different understanding of the crucifixion.

Am I suggesting that Paul was a *coward*? Well, Paul lived longer. From the time Paul was accused of his crimes to when he was tried and executed, it took several years. Paul declared that he was a Roman citizen and was therefore entitled to a trial as a Roman. And because of that, he slowly made his way from Greece toward Rome, writing letters and preparing himself for death as he awaited trial in an imperial court. So, I would not call him a coward at all, but someone who understood the value of procedures and the value of time.

And yet, I would also not call myself a follower of Paul. I am a follower of Jesus.

I can understand why people want to live, why they are willing to go along with authority. I do so myself all the time. I do not go through red lights at midnight. I do not litter when no one is around. I try to be a good and conscientious citizen.

But what would I do when faced with a more significant challenge? Something more dire than stopping at a red light and not littering? What would I do if someone in front of me was being taken away off the street by masked men? What would I do if someone was being persecuted before my own eyes. Persecuted for who they are, for who they love, for just trying to be?

What would I do if I witnessed the fundamental teaching of Jesus, to love one another, being abused in public, being abused because it was pleasing to someone in authority? Because it made someone in authority feel slightly more secure in their tenuous claims to power? Some modern-day Herod looking to feel like he was truly in power? Would I stand up to someone like that? Would I place myself in jeopardy? What would I do?

As I stand here this morning, I could try to offer an answer. But it would be a meaningless answer. The security of a pulpit has its indulgences, but it is no true test of moral courage. Because in the face of a threat to my life, I do not know if I would be like Paul or if I would be like Jesus. I do not know if I would be like the magi, running away to some safe place elsewhere. And I do not know if I would be like those who let the Romans do what they wanted because they did not wish to suffer or die like Jesus. I honestly do not know.

But I hope that would do so. I hope that I would live up to my highest ideals in the face of danger. I hope that a lifetime of following Jesus is more than words, more than proud talk that means nothing when truly tested.

And I know what I *should* do: *Follow Jesus. Always follow Jesus.* I can only hope that when I am challenged, I will live up to that truth. Amen.