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Matthew 2:1-12

## TRANSFER OF POWER

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There is nothing so dangerous as an insecure leader who is faced with losing power. That truth is rather evident in our lives right now. Insecure leaders who fear losing their power will lie, deceive, lash out in anger even at their allies, sabotage policies and plans, and will even cause harm to their own people.

We see this taking place in the passage from Matthew's gospel. The magi show up in Jerusalem asking where they can find the newborn King of the Jews, and in doing so, they throw King Herod into a panic. Herod feels very threatened by this potential rival to his throne. So Herod lies to the magi, and tries to deceive them with his false claims of wanting to know the child's location so he can extend honor to the child as well. Of course, what Herod really intends is reprehensible. In a fit of rage and paranoia, Herod orders the slaughter of all the children in Bethlehem under the age of two. Mary and Joseph and their newborn son barely escape and are forced to become refugees, who must leave everything behind—their homeland, their livelihoods, their family--in order to flee to Egypt for safety.

The magi unintentionally set off this cascade of tragedy with their arrival in Jerusalem. They first go to Jerusalem because it was the seat of the region's power, the center of commerce and politics and religion, the place where important people lived. The magi mistakenly thought that this is where they would find the newborn King of the Jews. After all, when looking for those in power, one naturally goes to the places of power. But that's where the magi got it

wrong—because the priests and the scribes tell the magi that according to the scriptures, the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

Now Bethlehem is only 9 miles from Jerusalem, but it might as well be 900 miles. The two communities could not be more different. Jerusalem, the great and prosperous city, was the home of the urban elite, of rulers, and the powerful. Jerusalem was a city that operated on the ideas of self-sufficiency, and wealth, and status. It was a city filled with anxious striving to get ahead and efforts to hold on to one's advantages in life.

But Bethlehem was a village of peasants, of the poor and the powerless. When the magi arrive in Bethlehem, they don't find palaces or the bustle of the market economy. Instead they find an unimportant village and a baby born to an impoverished couple. And these magi are given a vision of a very different kind of power in Bethlehem: a place where love makes itself vulnerable, where God's favor shines upon the poor and the least. Bethlehem becomes a symbol of the power of God present in unexpected people, and places, and forms.

Matthew's story of the magi sets up for us a contrast between two very different kinds of kings and kingdoms, between two very different kinds of power. And the story invites us to contemplate where our allegiances will lie. Will we live in and under the power structure of Jerusalem or will we transfer our allegiance to the power found in Bethlehem? Will we align our hearts and minds toward the kind of power that seeks to achieve and acquire what one can for oneself? Will we offer our lives over to the power of the fear of scarcity, of holding tight to what we have out of fear there won't be enough? Will the power of possessions lay hold of our hearts and minds? Will we strive to validate our lives through the power of wealth and success? Will bitterness or the desire for revenge lay hold of our hearts? Is this the power will we allow to claim us?

Or will we transfer our allegiance to the power found in Bethlehem? Will we accept the power of God's love to forgive us even for our worst mistakes? Will we accept the power of God to enable us to forgive others even for *their* worst mistakes? Can we allow the power of the God of Bethlehem to reshape our notions of who is important, and who is included, and who is loved by God? Will we allow ourselves to learn something new about the power found in generosity, forgiveness, compassion, and service?

We know, we know from our current reality that the transfer of power is not always accomplished easily or willingly. The message of Christmas is, however, about the transfer of power. With the gift of Christ and the way of Christ, God enables us to know a radically different kind of life. Christmas is when we admit we need God's power in our lives—not our own power, but *God's* power. We need God's grace, God's love, God's healing, God's work of transformation. Like power-hungry leaders we have witnessed in human history, all of us humans tend to gravitate toward those destructive powers that harm ourselves and others. But God steps in to save us—not to rob us of power, but to *empower* us with a force of superior strength and meaning: the power of love.