

“When kings search for Jesus”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Jenna and I love the BBC comedy *Rev*. It’s about Adam, a young Anglican priest serving a declining inner city church in London. In one episode, Adam is under pressure to raise his numbers and financial giving.

In walks Darren, a tall, good-looking, young priest who is looking for a church to bring his large, thriving congregation. Darren likes to say the word *awesome*. The church is awesome. The organ (which he finds out is broken) is awesome. Jesus is awesome. He also offers a check of 10,000 pounds... which is pretty awesome.

The next Sunday, Darren shows up with 400 young people, loads of pristine white couches and big-screen TVs, a rap star named Ikon, and a smoothie bar, offering selections such as Creamy Tropical Jesus Splash and the Merry Berry Jesus Explosion. At first you think maybe this is what this dull church needs—some energy, some passion, some smoothies. But as Adam later says, you quickly realize that this is more a show than a sacrament.

The real turning point, however, is when Darren demands that a man be barred from the church, a man who’s been going there for 15 years. Colin is poor. This church is all he’s got. He doesn’t wear nice clothes; he’s a bit smelly. He says and does things he shouldn’t. And now he’s disrupted Darren’s worship by doing something inappropriate. And Darren wants him gone.

He looks at Adam and says this is the price of success: either this man goes, or Darren will take his large, giving congregation elsewhere.

Adam says no; we do not bar people from the church, especially those in need. We forgive. God loves Colin, Adam says, and “Colin’s presence in this building is a blessing.”

And with that, Darren takes his gift of success and leaves.

The next Sunday, they’re back to their small, inclusive, racially and economically diverse congregation, singing loudly and off key, a homeless man sleeping in the back, and there is no doubt that the gospel is safe.

Today, as we celebrate Epiphany, four kings search for Jesus. Three do so for good reasons. One does not. Will we have the wisdom to know the difference?

Isaiah paints a beautiful and captivating portrait of what we all want for the church. We want to see the gospel fill the earth and the church grow. We want our young people to come back. We want the powers of this world to kneel before God and their riches to flow into the church.

Indeed, this is exactly what happens when the magi show up, and we pray that we will be gracious enough to receive these gifts. But the truth is that we can become so enamored with this desire for power and success that we overlook those, like Herod, who come with evil intentions and who threaten the integrity of the gospel.

King Herod says he wants to pay homage to Jesus. What a great opportunity, some might think. We can convert a king! His power will be our power! Thankfully, the magi see through the ruse. Do we? When powers and principalities offer what we want and seem to be promising great benefit for the church, do we blindly turn Christ over to them? Or do we see through them and take another road?

Let's think about who these magi are. Of course, they're not actually kings. The Greek word *magoi* means they are probably priests, educated in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. They come from Persia, or Babylon, or Arabia. Though not kings, they do represent power—they have wealth, are able to travel great distances, and speak multiple languages.

On the surface, King Herod and the magi have a lot in common. It might be hard to tell them apart. They all profess to want to pay homage to Jesus.

Of course, there are a number of obvious differences. The magi are led by God; Herod is not. The magi respond with joy to the announcement of Jesus' birth; Herod responds with fear. The magi act openly; Herod, secretly.

But in both cases, their true motives are unknown to us. The text does not tell us of the magi's intentions, and we do not yet know that Herod seeks to kill Jesus.

There is, however, another distinct mark on the magi that may help us see clearly who means well and who does not. Buried beneath our Christmas pageants, hidden within our carols and creches, there is a detail we often overlook. The magi do not immediately offer their gifts. The first thing they do is kneel and pay homage. Only then do they offer gifts.

This word, "to pay homage," *proskyneo*, is important. It appears three times in this short story, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. It means to prostrate oneself completely at the feet of a king. It was a custom so humbling, so self-effacing, that it was used as a common example by the more democratic Greeks of Persian totalitarianism. It was a radical offering of one's whole self in service of a king.

This is something Herod would never do; he's the only king he will bow to. His gift would be a transaction, a bribe, a means of controlling and limiting the receiver of the gift. His gift would be an expression of power and dominance over the one receiving the gift.

Herein lies the critical difference, and our most important litmus, for our four kings today; it's how we will know if we can trust politicians, donors, even our own motives. Do they offer homage first and gifts second, or promises and gifts first? Do they worship, or do they purchase?

Because, if the gifts come first, you can be sure that no homage will come second.

Thankfully, the magi do not report back to Herod; Jesus is kept safe. God takes them by another road. They find their way home, safely, even though the star has vanished. Writer Frank Thomas believes they no longer needed the star to lead them. He says that in the moment they see Jesus "the external power of the star goes internal." They have seen the Christ; that is all the star they need.

It is all the star *we* need. Today, we receive life through Communion. We worship. We even offer gifts. And we *will* see through the ruse. We will know who comes to worship and who comes to co-opt. Because we have seen Christ. God will take us by another road because a star is in us, a light that will protect this vulnerable, fragile king born to save us all. **Amen.**