The king of the Jews and the kin-dom of God (Matthew 2:1-12)

# In Matthew, Jesus' identity as king is the major source of conflict.

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The magi want to find the king of the Jews. So does Herod. Even as an infant, Jesus' identity as king provides the source of conflict for Matthew's story. The conflict never resolves itself. Matthew's story establishes Jesus' royal identity right from the beginning, an issue that remains contested even upon the cross. Today we still debate whether it is appropriate to speak of Jesus as king.

The pastor I heard Sunday invited the worshipers to participate in the "kin-dom of God." I know what the pastor means, and I applaud his intentions. But what happens when we trade kingly language for that of kinship?

We have compelling reasons for doing so. We don't have kings and queens anymore, so the concept doesn't resonate. Millennia have taught us to imagine kingdoms with boundaries and armies, expectations far removed from the kinds of communities Jesus was building. Most importantly, "kingdom" connotes one man who rules over everyone else, a domination system. Even if the king is beneficent, he still leaves us with a Lion King sort of imagination: so long as the right man stands on the rock, all will be well. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza labels such systems as "kyriarchy," the rule of (almost always) male superiors over other classes of people. We do not think of the Jesus Movement that way. Kin-dom suggests a movement in which everyone has a part, a network of relationships rather than an organizational chart. Drawing upon the ancient practice of calling one another brother and sister, kin-dom

communicates love.

But kin-dom has its own limitations. To confess Jesus as king implies allegiance only to him, not to other authorities. Kin-dom suggests a rejection of domination systems, but not so directly as does Jesus' kingdom of God. As I'm writing this, democracy is losing its grip all over the world. We have seen Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and Thailand all let go of democracy in favor of authoritarian governance. By confessing Jesus as King, Matthew reminds us what God's divine rule looks like—and it scarcely resembles militarized police, intimidated press, or nuclear threats.

More to the point, Matthew does not hide Jesus' conflict with the rulers of his day, petty or grand. In the infancy narrative Herod comes off as frightened, underhanded, and then—like many men who desire to project power but lack inner strength—he grows murderous. In the passion narrative, Pontius Pilate at first pushes back against the crowd's demand for Jesus' life, aware that the temple authorities are pulling the strings out of their own jealousy. In Matthew Pilate never declares Jesus' innocence, but he does wash his hands of the blood guilt for Jesus' death (27:15-26). Pilate, the authorized representative of Caesar, abdicates his authority and sends Jesus to his fate. Above them all sits Caesar, the lord, known as the Son of God. Confronted by the question of paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus points out that it's impossible to give God all that God demands while yielding all that Caesar requires. Both want the same thing: absolute loyalty (22:15-22).

In this light Jesus' kingdom talk provides an alternative language. It is a rejection of Herod, of Pilate, and ultimately of Caesar, of their ways and of their very existence as lords. Jesus' kingdom talk testifies to an ancient Israelite concept: although we may know rulers of various stripes, Israel's one true ruler is God. Loyalty—isn't loyalty just another way of saying worship?—belongs only to God.

Our moments of worship call for creative, reflective expression. We surely benefit from celebrating our communion in God's kin-dom. We acknowledge our sins together. Assured those sins are forgiven, we pass the peace, bring forth our offerings, and meet at a common table. Kin-dom language is entirely appropriate and healthy for worship. At the same time, we may also meditate on how God's gracious rule might judge the domination systems we encounter every day.