

“Back to Life”

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I am a Chief Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem. Before you, “boo,” or judge me too harshly, I want to tell you a little bit about what it means to be the Chief Priest in this time. First of all, I have worked very hard my entire life to get where I am today. It is a huge challenge and responsibility. Hundreds, if not thousands, of young men have tried and made it their entire life’s goal to become the Chief Priest - to be the one that goes into the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem, to be the one person who represents the people in the very presence of the Almighty.

All of that work, faith and diligence left me at that place, at that time, and it was so exciting when I became the Chief Priest. Then I quickly realized that I was about a generation too late, because at about the same time I became the Chief Priest, a king was crowned from Rome. His name was Herod. Now, until Herod came along the Chief Priest had incredible power. We - the Chief Priests - represented the government. We spoke on behalf of the people in politics. We controlled the taxes. We had to give some to Rome, but most of it was for our people and we had the responsibility, as Chief Priest, for the spiritual nurturing and well-being of the people - the Jewish, chosen people.

Now, all of a sudden, Herod comes along and wipes out any control of the Chief Priest over the political well-being of our people. I’m allowed to pay taxes for our people but, after we have paid so much to Rome, there is very little left. I’m kind of ceremonial now. Except that I do try to provide for the spiritual welfare of my people. That is *if* I can keep Herod happy, so that he doesn’t murder me or take that responsibility away from me as well.

It is not easy keeping Herod happy. He is brutal, sly and cunning, and he is paranoid beyond any conceivable understanding. He is sure that anyone who speaks up - anyone who gets any amount of control or respect is murdered, so Herod can be *absolutely certain* that he will not be over thrown. It is not fun being in power right now. I am almost grateful that he has taken most of my power away from me.

Then all of a sudden here come these Magi, these filthy magicians. Any good Jewish person would know that magicians, or Magi, or kings, or whatever else you want to call them, are nothing but trouble. They are deceptive. What every good Jewish person knows is this: they are deceptive and dangerous. Dangerous because they bring a false religion with them, and dangerous because any king around King Herod creates conflict. We do not know what they are up to, but Herod does not like change.

So they come right into Jerusalem. They actually did what they were supposed to do; they showed him respect. They showed Herod courtesy. Any king would know that you go to another king for permission to be in their land. It keeps wars from happening. And, much to my surprise, Herod actually comes in and meets with them. He treats them with a certain amount of respect because they treated him with respect. But I shuddered to the core when I realized what they were talking about: They wanted permission to get information about our religion, because they were talking about a “Messiah.”

Now, all Jews want that second moment when they realize that a Messiah is going to give birth - but not now - not in the moment when Herod is ruling. Because Herod will find a Jewish Messiah to be a rival and all of a sudden, in that moment, there will be war between Rome and the Jewish people. God would know better than to get in the midst of this King Herod, to try to bring a Messiah into the world. God is not that stupid.

They kept talking about the star. I knew instantly what they were talking about, because it says in Micah 5:2: *Oh, thou Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah; from you shall come forth to me, one who is rule over Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.* They were asking where this Messiah was to be located. I knew immediately where that star was shining, and Herod seemed to be happy with them, so I told them where to go: just a few miles south.

Part of me was thrilled. Good, I have a place for you to go. Get out of here before Herod changes his mind. Then you will find out that Bethlehem is this little, Podunk place. You will find out that nobody is there except for peasants. There is no king there. Then you can go home and leave us alone, and not upset Herod anymore. So we sent them on their way. Herod calls them back, "Now, come back and tell me what you find so that we, too, can go and worship. Huh? We all knew what that meant. If they found anything at all, that supposed king would be dead.

We sent them on their way. We waited and we waited. The longer we waited the angrier Herod got, and the more I tried to stay out of the way because Herod instinctively knew. He is not a dummy. He knew and I knew that when those Wise Men did not return that they had seen something. You know what I'm scared to even surmise, but Herod looked at me and said, "What did you tell them? Could there be one?"

I said, "No," knowing full well there might just be one. The prophesy showed it, and why would they not return if there was nothing to see and nothing to report? The Wise Men would have come back. The Wise Men put their very lives in jeopardy - and that of their people - by not coming back and reporting back to him. If there was nothing to report they would have done it, so they would have safe passage through our land and back home. No harm, no foul. So they had to have seen something that they did not want to report and were willing to put their lives and their nation in jeopardy to go around and avoid Herod. Their avoiding Herod meant that I could not avoid Herod.

Now before you judge me too much, put yourself in my shoes for just one minute. Over and over again, through the centuries, they have said about me, "the Messiah was just a couple of miles away, no more than six miles from the Temple. Where were you? Why didn't you go down there?"

I was trying to control a situation that was much greater than myself. If I even attempted to go down there, I would have inflamed the peasants and that would create more, and my people that I have a spiritual responsibility for would be murdered.

The Chief Priest does not go to Bethlehem, especially to see a supposed King of the Jews. My very act of going down there legitimates that, whatever it is. I didn't want to give Herod any thought that this could be real. But it didn't matter.

The minute I knew that the Wise Men were not coming back, Herod was already starting to plan. He knew there was a problem, so he told his guards to go down there and kill every child, every first born male under the age of 2. Slaughtered.

That night I hung my head. I felt all of the blood leave my body, and my soul dry up and wither, because I was complicit. I was complicit of the murder of those children. I was complicit in ignoring my Messiah. I was complicit in everything that happened because I didn't have the courage or my convictions of the trust in the faith of the God I had worshiped and cared for, and been in the Holy of Holies with *all* of these years, because I didn't get up and go those six miles to check him out. It was only later - years later - when he died on that cross fulfilling everything he had said along the way, and was resurrected and then later ascended into Heaven, that I realized I had missed it.

The Holy of Holies wasn't all that special. We had the Holy of Holies right there in the stable in Bethlehem. I could have walked there and I missed it, all because I was more concerned about the worldly matters of what might happen with the government; that someone might get slaughtered - and they got slaughtered anyway. If I have to be truly honest with myself, I just really wasn't really ready to give up what I had worked so hard for: the comfort of my prestige, the money in my pocket, and my life on this earth.

I didn't want to sacrifice and only later did I realize that in trying not to sacrifice, I sacrificed everything my entire life. Don't make the same mistake I did.

I didn't walk six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

On Sunday morning you have the opportunity to drive a few miles to honor your Messiah. Make the effort. Commit to this. This new year make a resolution to pray and share a moment of devotional time. It doesn't have to be an hour. Make it realistic. Ten or fifteen minutes, but do *something* so that you know the Messiah and the light, and when something is getting your attention, that you recognize it.

You are so close to God that you are communing with God every day. You know what it feels like when God is speaking to you. I didn't. For goodness sake, I had light shining right there and I didn't go, because my prayer and devotional life was so limited that I didn't feel it when God was speaking to me. Don't make that same mistake. Have the courage to do something in outreach; to do something for others beyond yourself, or you will fall in the same trap I did and do whatever is best and most expedient for me.

Finally, go to a class. Learn about that Bible we just dedicated so that when you delve into those Scriptures they will come alive for you. You not only know what is in them but - even more importantly - you will know how to interpret them. I interpreted them badly, I knew right where to tell those Wise Men to go, out of Scripture - Micah 5:2 - and yet I didn't know how to interpret it well enough to go myself.

Don't make the same mistake! Make the Messiah your priority, which is more important than your prestige, or your money, or your pride. Be willing to give your very life for it. People give their faith away on silly things. Don't [do that] or you will end up like me: lost and regretful. Renew that commitment in this New Year so that your life - your very

soul - will come alive and bring new life. It is through the Messiah - Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior.

Amen