

WHO WILL BE THE KING?

A Christmas Story by the Rev. John Dixon Elder, D.Min
as told at the Hyattsville Mennonite Church

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Scripture Lesson: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.'" (Matthew 2:1-2)

Have you ever played "King of the Mountain"? I used to play that game every winter when I was growing up, because on our street in Syracuse the snow plows would leave a huge pile of snow, and my friends and I would gather at that pile after school to see who would "king." Sometimes I've played that game on a sand dune, or even just on a big pile of dirt.

I suppose "King of the Mountain" is a game that has been played all over the world, even as long ago as the time when Jesus was born. Let's pretend this morning that we are way back in the time when Jesus was born, two thousand years ago, and we are in the town of Bethlehem, up in the mountains on the road that leads south from Jerusalem toward Egypt. The afternoon sun is low in the sky; the wind is blowing in chill gusts; but over in the shelter of the great fortress wall built centuries before by King Rehoboam, some boys and girls are playing games. Part of the wall had long ago tumbled in, and dirt has been piled on it, so there is a long, sloping incline up the face of the huge stone blocks.

Gedaliah has been playing with his ten-year-old friends on the top of the wall near the city gate, tossing pebbles at the donkeys plodding along to make them "hee-haw" until their masters look up and shout curses at the pestering boys. Just then two Roman centurions - soldiers, with helmets and armor and swords at their sides - come marching along below to police the crowded road, and the boys scramble in a hurry back down behind the wall.

"Come on," Julius, the tallest boy, shouts. "I challenge you all! I'm 'King of the Mountain.'" And he grabs a headband from one of the girls, slips it over his blond hair, and runs up the slope.

Julius is the son of a centurion from Rome. Julius' mother had died, and his father received special permission for his son to come stay with him here in distant Judea until his tour of duty was over. At first Julius was very lonely, because the Jewish boys avoided him. The Roman Emperor, Octavian, now called Caesar Augustus, had forced order on his empire and proclaimed that the whole world was now at peace. The Romans thought Caesar was divine and called the emperor Octavian "the son of God." But the Jews believed that was blasphemy. They were waiting for a ruler of their own - the Messiah promised by God who would rule like King David over a free and independent Israel. So Jewish boys would not play with a centurion's son.

But little by little Gedaliah and his friends had begun to include Julius in their games. For one thing, Julius could get them worn-out tunics from the guards' quarters. What fun it was to march down the street with a shirt marked "Property of the Roman Legion"! Also, Julius knew tricks of sword-fighting and showed them how to duel with the wooden weapons they tied together with leather thongs.

Now, though, Julius is at the top of the slope, shouting down at Gedaliah and his friends, "I am the Emperor, the Son of God. No one can pull me from my throne!"

Gedaliah's best friend is Benjamin, a boy who laughs and jokes despite his twisted leg, broken when he was a little tot and had run into the street to watch the war chariots of a Roman army on a campaign under the command of the Governor of Syria. As Gedaliah and the other boys charge up the slope and are thrown back down, again and again, by the taller, stronger Julius, Benjamin watches quietly, and a little sadly. But he claps when Gedaliah grabs at Julius' stolen headband and almost gets the make-believe "crown" before Julius knocks his legs out from under him and sends Gedaliah tumbling and screaming back down the dusty slope.

But now Gedaliah has lost his temper. He yells at Julius, "You dirty pagan! I hate all you filthy Romans! King David is coming back, and he will rule! And not only in Judah, but in the whole world!" Gedaliah charges up the slope with a sharp rock hidden behind his back.

Benjamin catches sight of the rock and starts to run as best he can after Gedaliah, shouting, "Stop, Gedaliah! Stop! You can't become King that way!" Just then Benjamin stumbles, his crippled leg crumples under him, and as he falls down his forehead hits the edge of one of the broken stone blocks.

"Wait!" Julius shouts at Gedaliah. "We need to help Benjamin!" And he jumps from his perch at the top of the mound and leaps down over the rocks to where Benjamin is lying, stunned. Gedaliah drops the rock he was ready to throw and runs back down, too, and together they lean over Benjamin. "Are you all right, Ben?" "Ouch - yes, but I sure hit my head!" There is a scratch on his forehead, and a little blood trickling down. Julius takes off the stolen headband and wraps it around Benjamin's bleeding forehead. And Julius and Gedaliah get on either side of Benjamin, put his arms across their shoulders, and lift him up.

"Look who's wearing the crown! Who will be the King after all!" laughs Gedaliah. "Come on, up we go!" And together Julius and Gedaliah carry Benjamin to the top of the slope and hoist him up on the highest stone. "Maybe," says Julius, "the real King of the world will be the person who can stop our fighting and bring peace between your people and mine."

"Hey!" Benjamin whispers. "Come look over the wall. Who are they?" Gedaliah and Julius scramble up, and as they lean over the wall, they see in the darkness that is spreading over Bethlehem a procession of strange looking men, with pack animals, loaded down with bundles. The men have stopped and are talking among themselves, and then together they look up into the sky, which seems strangely bright though the sun has nearly set.

"Let's see where they're going!" says Benjamin. Julius and Gedaliah help him down the slope, and the three boys push their way through the crowds who have come to Bethlehem to be registered in the census. "Wow, what a mob!" mutters Julius. "Yeah," replies Gedaliah, "I have to sleep in the stable because my folks have rented my room to people from out of town."

Just then they spot the strange men, not on the main street, but making their way slowly through a back alley. "They are going to the stable behind the inn," says Benjamin. "Mom said a baby was just born there to a man and a woman who couldn't get a bed in the inn."

The three boys creep quietly up next to the stable and watch as the strange men begin unloading bundles from the caravan and opening them up. "Whew!" gasps Julius. "Look at that! I never saw boxes like that, even in Rome!"

The strange men bow low to enter the stable door, and as Benjamin, Julius and Gedaliah peek in behind them, they see inside a young woman with a tiny baby in her arms. "This is the King of the Jews," one of the strangers says to the man watching over the mother and her child. "We have seen his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." And the strange men, robed in their long cloaks, fall on their knees, place their beautifully decorated boxes gently on the ground before the baby, and quietly open their magnificent gifts. In the flickering candle-light the boys cannot see what the glittering boxes contain, but they smell the heavy aroma of precious spices and scents. Then, still kneeling, the strange men back out the door, and before the amazed boys realize it, they are gone.

"Did you hear what he said?" Julius whispers. "Is this baby really the one who will be your king?" "And yours, too!" says Gedaliah. "And mine," says Benjamin. "My King, and the King of everyone."

Benjamin slipped his headband off - his blood-stained "crown" - and kneeling down, placed it very gently beside the strangers' gifts.

And then the boys separated in the darkness and went home to sleep, and to dream.