

EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD
January 6, 2019

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Theme: Search Diligently for the Child

There are two ways that we can tell the story of the wise men. One is better suited for our children and the other is meant for adults. In the version for children we have embellished the story to include three men who come from afar to bear gifts for the newborn king. They first encounter King Herod who told them to search diligently for the child so he, too, could worship him. Then from our Christmas cards we see the men riding majestically on their camels in the dark of night to follow the light of a bright evening star. When they finally reach their destination, we see them bowing before the child who lies in the manger. Opening their treasure chest filled with the richest of gifts they offer to the infant gold, frankincense and myrrh. As the story draws to a close we join his mother with looks of adoration upon the whole magical scene.

It is a beautiful story and it is a wonderful way to end the twelve days of Christmas. It is a story that must be told to our children because it teaches them the source of our gift-giving at Christmas. It is a story that must be shared with others because it teaches us to offer our very best to God.

And this idyllic scene involves more than the exchange of gifts. From the moment that Christ was born the news spreads quickly. Angels made an announcement to the shepherds tending to their flocks by night. Now these men (who lived nowhere near Bethlehem) come in search of the child in order to worship him. It testifies to the fact that the news about the birth of Christ was not restricted to the small group of people called the Israelites.

God is making himself known to all people and the world is about to change. Already we see signs that there will no longer be *insiders* and *outsiders*. Everyone is included in God's plan of salvation. All distinctions between people of different cultures and backgrounds are dissolving. The news of God's redeeming love is reaching all corners of the world and it is embracing all kinds of people.

We have a childlike fascination with the story of the magi but hidden within its pages is the same story but from a different perspective. It is this version that is for the adults to hear because the story of the three wise men could also be the tale of two kings.

When we consider the latter then it leads us to reflect on Herod also known as Herod the Great. He was famous for all of his rebuilding projects that included the Second Temple in Jerusalem. It came to be known as his temple. Historians tell us that all of his efforts to rebuild the city were done so that he would have a capital city worthy of his position and it would give him stronger support among the Jews. However, he was erratic in his behavior and he had the reputation of being a tyrant. Everything he did, he did to bring glory to himself.

It is a human fact that one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power and they will do anything to get their own way. Herod was king and he wanted to remain the king. He was frightened when the men from the East inquired about a child who had just been born (and who already was known to these foreigners as the *King of the Jews*). Herod wanted to regain control of the situation because he was threatened by the mere mention of another leader.

As adults we know that fear is a powerful thing. In response to his fear Herod enticed the chief priests and scribes to conspire to find the Messiah and kill him. When we read the rest of Matthew 2 we know they do not succeed this time around but this one attempt is just the beginning. Much later in the story there will be another alliance made between the political and religious leaders of the day. In their fear of Jesus they will not only conspire against him but they will arrest and crucify him.

Seen from this perspective we experience fear instead of joy and opposition instead of acceptance. Herod is not searching diligently for the Christ child so that he could worship him and bring him the perfect gift from his treasure chest. Instead he is afraid and we are told that all those in Jerusalem are afraid as well.

There is a reason we read from the *Gospel of Luke* on Christmas Eve. The author of the *Gospel of Matthew* moves us from adoration to a dark and ambivalent world with fear-induced violence. The author is sober and realistic.

He renders an accurate and difficult picture of the world.

So what about us? What does fear do to us? We are certainly not like Herod but we do experience fear and it affects our bodies and it can make us feel uncomfortable. It can emotionally paralyze us and cloud our reasoning. It can lead to feelings of inadequacy.

We live in a world riddled with fear. In my annual report I mention that I have attended more meetings this past year on the topic of *Safety and Security* than ever before in my twenty-three years of ministry. Aside from making our houses of worship secure and still welcoming, I have open conversations with people about the fears we have about the economy and the wild fluctuations with the stock market. Our fears are as real as the wild fires that swept through California. We contemplate the state of our nation and our world and it affects each of us in a real way.

What is our antidote to such fears? We will certainly not find it in the person of Herod the Great but we will find it in Jesus Christ. In this tale of two kings we turn our attention to God who promised to come to inaugurate his kingdom. God came in the person of Jesus Christ. God came at a time when things were seemingly out of control and messy. God came to people who were overcome with fear. God came as *Emmanuel*, God with us. God came as a living, breathing, and vulnerable baby to live and die with us so that in his resurrection we too might live a new life.

In the rest of Matthew 2 we are given a beautiful example of what happens when we do not let our fears overcome us and we follow the one, true king. An angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream and told him to take his family and flee to Egypt. He was warned that Herod wanted to kill his newborn son.

In the version we tell our children we share a tale of an uneventful journey that took them away from their home temporarily. But in the adult version we know that fear must have crept into the very soul of Joseph. His family was threatened and he needed to keep them safe. But he did not let his fears rule his decisions. He was obedient to God and followed his instructions.

When we are overcome with fear our tale of two kings teaches us to focus on Christ alone. We are to seek the Lord and search diligently for the child so that we can bow down before him and offer him our very souls. We follow this king because he rules with compassion and love. Our king defends us. Our king only lays his hands upon us to bless us.

As we have seen, we need both interpretations of this story (the one we share with our children and the more realistic one) in order to place our fears in the hands of a loving God who entered the world as the *King of the Jews* and left the world as the *Lord of all*. Amen