

Epiphany Sunday
January 1, 2017
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It's a new year. and we have someone new coming into power.
The government is killing innocent people.
People don't know what to do about the foreigners coming into the land.
Religious leaders are failing.
And people are scared.

This is the setting of our Scripture today.

*Jesus has come.
The government is killing innocent people.
People don't know what to do about the foreigners coming into the land.
Religious leaders are failing.
And people are scared.*

In our story we see 4 different characters responding to his coming. Herod, the Chief priests and Scribes, the townspeople, and the Magi.

Jesus has come, the world has changed. Will you? How will you let his coming affect you?

Herod responds out of his insecurities and fears.

He was such an insecure dude.

The town he created for himself - Herodium - he wanted to be just a little bit taller than the next mountain over. So he literally had slave labor build up his mountain to be just a little bit taller and then build his palace on top....and named it after himself.
Imagine a leader who was so insecure that he would name buildings and places after himself.

So when Herod hears there is a new king in town, his insecurities rise, and he clutches for control.

He calls secret meetings,
he strategizes,

he manipulates the foreign wise men to do his bidding.

He gives justifications for his actions - saying "Don't worry...I'll go and worship him too."

He's got a security plan.

And he even goes as far as murder. As Jane told us last week in the very sad part of the Christmas story, Herod has all the baby boys killed so that this baby King Jesus won't take his throne.

When Jesus comes into our world with such vulnerability, he reveals our deepest insecurities. The need to be something. The need to make our mark on the world. The need to be remembered. The need to be in control. The need to be safe.

If only Herod were vulnerable enough to recognize these insecurities inside of him.

But instead, his efforts don't result in the security he hopes for.

He ends up ineffective, terrified, and isolated.

(Completely and desperately in need of the peace of the savior he refuses)

One common response in our changing world today is to live out of insecurity and fear. But when responding like Herod, there is no way to see the hope of a coming king.

The World has changed. How will his coming affect you? Will you be like the insecure Herod clutching for security?

Or maybe, some of us can identify more with the Scribes and chief priests in the story. Herod calls for the Scribes and Chief Priests to tell him where the Messiah is to be born. They know their Bibles! They quote him Scriptures about the Messiah's coming to the town of Bethlehem.

Interestingly, these religious leaders have all the answers, but they aren't doing anything about it. They aren't going to search for Jesus. They aren't going with the Magi to worship him. They stay with Herod, their king of the Jews, instead of welcoming Jesus, the true king of the Jews.

Some in our world today, watch it changing. They see it all and have answers....they know everything there is to know but aren't doing anything at all. (And just completely miss Jesus all together).

Our world today is full of coffee-house Christians. I admit that I have been one of these. Coffee-house Christians sit in their comfortable chairs with their warm drinks and complain about all the poverty, violence, and hatred of our world. And then go up to the counter to get another latte while they wait for the world to change.....by somebody else.

And our world today is full of Facebook Christians. With heads buried in screens, Facebook Christians will yell and scream and post articles of the horrors of political and social realities. They know all the arguments and *their* posts are always right (at least, well, my posts are always right.) But all the arguments over phones and computers have never solved a thing and have divided us even further....all the while the poor remain poor, the hungry remain hungry, and the sick remain alone.

The Scribes and Chief Priests in the story are like so many people in our world today.... knowing the answers and knowing all too well the problems. But are unwilling to let Jesus' coming cost us anything personally.

And though busy doing the work of God, sadly, they miss Jesus entirely.

The World has changed. How will his coming affect you? Will you be like the insecure Herod clutching for security? Or the religious leaders who know the truth but don't do anything about it?

Or maybe, you are like the townspeople of Jerusalem.

Our story only gives the people of Jerusalem one line. And at a first glance, it's easy to miss their presence at all. But take a look at verse 3 in the story. "Herod was terrified, and all Jerusalem with him"

Many townspeople are cowering in their homes in fear.

And yes, the people of Jerusalem have many valid reasons to be afraid. According to our Scripture, Herod is an evil king. Anyone willing to kill children is a tyrant. (And we know from history that later on, Herod the Great even killed some of his own children so as to secure his throne a bit longer). His evil is known through the land.

And so the visiting magi appear and the people of Jerusalem shut their blinds. Who are these strangers coming by? These Magi speak another language. Their skin is a different color. They're marching straight to Herod's palace....is this a war?? Are they here to destroy Jerusalem and take it over?

But, unfortunately, when the townspeople of Jerusalem shut their blinds, they can't see the star, and they miss out on meeting the really fascinating Magi and they miss out on hearing the Magi's passion and excitement about the Messiah's birth.

The people of Jerusalem are too scared to risk going outside. They aren't up for an adventure. They're tired, beat up, and crawl back into bed.

Our world is so full of scary things. Each day when we turn on the news we get the numbers of people shot in nearby cities. We hear the latest updates about battles overseas. And we hear about the latest research of what else causes cancer and other sicknesses. It's almost too scary to go outside. Even coming to church can be a risk, as you might catch cold, or get in a car accident, or trip and fall.....and that's not even mentioning the reality of mass shootings and acts of terror that happen in safe places like churches and schools.

Sometimes, it can be more tempting to shut the blinds and crawl back into bed. Amen?

But doing so, could mean missing out on the life and abundance that Jesus brings. It could mean missing the chance to worship him.

The World has changed. How will his coming affect you? Will you be like the insecure Herod clutching for security? Or the religious leaders who know the truth but don't do anything about it? Or the people of Jerusalem who are too scared to go outside of their homes?

OR, will you be like the Magi? The Magi drop everything and go find Jesus. The Magi aren't even Jewish and they go on a pilgrimage to find the king of the Jews! They travel to a land that is hostile to strangers and is known for a brutal king and horrific acts of violence. They seek Jesus out and go to great lengths to find him. They are fearless...they climb right up to Herod's Palace and say, "Where's the king of the Jews?" (Wow! Could they be more bold? And reckless? I'm surprised Herod (the actual, titled, king of the Jews) doesn't cut off their heads right then and there for treason!) But their high risk brings high reward. Our story says that when the Magi find Jesus, they are overwhelmed with joy. They present him with expensive, lavish gifts, and they bow down and worship him.

These Magi – they're outsiders! They don't belong! They don't likely know much about the Scriptures and they've probably never worshipped in a temple. They don't know much about King Jesus, but THEY are the ones who are the heroes of the story.

The Magi have something that can't really be taught. They have hearts that are open to God.

In a world that is changing faster than wanted or imagined, the Magi don't try to control it or hide from it, they open their doors, and open their hearts to the King.

There's no doubt that our world is changing. So how will you respond today?

Will you be like the insecure Herod clutching for security? Or the religious leaders who know the truth but don't do anything about it? Or the people of Jerusalem who are too scared to go outside of their homes?

Or will you be Magi – who drop everything to follow Jesus?

----Let's bow our heads for prayer. And in the quiet of this moment, take a second to reflect on how you will respond to Jesus' coming...as I will lead us through a guided prayer.

What character are you today?

Do you relate to Herod? Do you often feel afraid you aren't good enough? Or won't be remembered?

Hear God's reminder that you were created in God's image and knit together in your mother's womb.

Take a moment and consider....what are the ways you have become like the Chief Priests and Scribes?

Are there things you spend so much time and energy worrying and complaining about...that maybe today God is inviting you to surrender them to him? Are you being called to act in a way that will cost you something?

And now shift your thinking to the ordinary townspeople of Jerusalem. Are you afraid?

Breathe in God's promise that God will never leave you and there is nothing that can separate you from God's love. It Will Be Okay.

And finally, ask God to make you like the Magi.
Have you been overwhelmed with joy over Jesus' birth?

Lord, may we once again be amazed at your coming. Make us fearless and joyful at all the possibilities of your kingdom. Amen.