

Today is the last sermon in our series “What do you fear?” I’d like to start with where we find ourselves in the Christmas story. Herod has loomed large over the story of Christ’s birth and now on this Epiphany Sunday, he looms even larger. He is still in power and his paranoia, his rage, is on full display. The messiah has been born, yet it feels as if the world has not changed. And don’t we see that even now? Over 2,000 years later. Herods still reign. They are still paranoid and full of rage. Empire continues domination over the innocents. These Herods continue to inflict harm on innocent people, like in Gaza and Ukraine. Now in Venezuela. All for Empire.

In this country women of color still find themselves given less care than white women when giving birth. The maternal death rate has increased. Healthcare gone for so many. Food and housing insecurity grows. So many innocent still suffer under Empire. The temptation to give up is strong for many, especially in the face of all the violence and hatred that we see and hear all around us.

But today we read about the Magi. We have created this image of the magi that is whitewashed. Wise men dressed in the finest of robes come bearing gifts to this newborn king. But let us take a moment to think about who the Magi were, why they felt it was important to travel so far to see this newborn king, and what they had to go through to find the newborn king. For this passage in Matthew is a political and theological narrative of that harrowing time of Christ’s birth.

The magi were from Persia and were known for their knowledge of astrology and Zoroastrianism. Both men and women could be magi. In the Bible we have the story of three magi coming, but it could have been more and there could have been women among them. Perhaps they were all women, come to worship this tiny baby. They knew of ancient prophecies of the coming of the King of the Jews and a special star, so when they saw the celestial

event, they recognized it as the sign for the Jewish Messiah's birth.

But why would they be interested in going through the hardship of traveling from what is now Iran to Jerusalem to see a newborn king of the Jews? Clearly a lot of things could go wrong on the journey, but they don't let fear stop them. They persevere and persist, possibly because they hoped that this Judean king could lead to restoration of their own Persian customs and culture that was being challenged by the ever expanding Roman Empire.

The Magi needed to stop in Jerusalem because the prophecies they knew didn't clearly state where the messiah would be born and they could no longer see the star. In Jerusalem they found a paranoid king who asked to be notified when they found this newborn king. Yet in a dream they were told to go home another way. What harm might come to them if they were found to defy King Herod? Yet they continued their journey, working through any fear, found the newborn messiah, worshipped him and then departed by another way.

The point of this story today is that fear didn't stop the Magi from coming to worship this Jewish Messiah's birth. Their journey was long and treacherous, especially the end when they defied Herod's request. Yet they persisted and were blessed with the opportunity to worship this new king.

There are two points that I would like us to think about and take away from this passage today. The first is that right from the beginning of Christ's birth we see God setting the stage for Jesus' ministry to the poor and outcast, to the Gentiles, to those outside of the "In Crowd" of power elites. The shepherds and the magi. They were the first to recognize Jesus for who he was and to bow down and worship him. In the humble setting of a stable, Jesus began his life teaching us humility, inclusion, and courage over fear.

The second is that God calls us forward even when we're not clear on the way to go and we find ourselves fearful. The Magi followed the star until they didn't see it. So, they inquired in Jerusalem. When they stopped to inquire, they encountered evil. Yet they persisted.

We may at times only have a vague nudging of where to go or what to do, and to look ahead we may see only obstacles, which seem daunting and maybe even threatening, but as we have heard over these last several weeks, God is with us every step of the way to guide us and protect us. Whether it is confronting demons in our minds that keep us from fully **worshipping** our Lord to physical challenges or fears that keep us from fully **serving** our Lord, we need to face our fears to be able to fully embrace the faith and life that God calls into. We need to make sure that fear doesn't stop us. We need to remember that God is always with us to guide and uplift us.

I'm sure that all of you were as horrified as I was to hear of the attack on Venezuela. As appalling and evil as Maduro is, the fact that our president went in without any authorization from Congress, is quite disturbing. I usually try to talk in euphemisms when talking about our president and his illegal policies. I would say the "government" is partaking in illegal activities, but this time it is hard not to call out the ever increasing threat to our democracy and the threat to common human decency by the figurehead who is behind it all. President Trump.

More so, he and the people behind him put the very lives of the young men and women who serve this country, who signed up to put their lives on the line to protect our freedoms, in harms way. They did not sign up to put their lives on the line for profits for big oil companies and the vanity and greed of one man who happens

to hold power. They did not sign up to put their lives on the line to subjugate the people of Venezuela to occupation.

The road ahead looks bleak and dark. There are lots of twists and turns in the road that we cannot see around. But what we do know, there is a lot of work to be done to protect the innocents of this country and of Venezuela. It may look daunting, overwhelming, and meaningless to even attempt to battle Herod, but if not us than who?

After one sermon that was social justice focused, I had someone come to me after the service and ask why I hadn't included Martin Niemoller's famous **First They Came**, but let me include it here in my own current events focused version.

**First they came for the undocumented
And I did not speak out
Because I was not an undocumented
Then they came for the green card holder
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a green card holder
Then they came for the naturalized citizen
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a naturalized citizen
Then they came for the trans people, the poor, the mentally ill
And I did not speak out because I was not trans, poor, or
mentally ill
Then they came after the politicians that opposed them
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a politician
Then they came for the Venezuelans,
And I did not speak out
Because I was not living in Venezuela
Then they came for me
And there was no one left**

To speak for me.

What lies ahead, i do not know. What I do know is that to worship the King of Kings means that we need to defy Herod just like the Magi did.

We serve a God who calls on us to stand up and speak out on social injustices, to stand up to power, just as Jesus Christ taught us through his life. We need to listen to our dreams, our visions, to that still small voice inside that calls us to action.

The Magi departed by a different way. They did so because they were instructed to do so in their dreams. But I think it is fair to say that they departed by a different way also because they had met the Christ and they had been transformed by that encounter. We are a new people. Born from the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Today we feast on the Lord and then, with the Spirit of God within, we go forth in faith. We do not let fear stop us from pushing back on Herod; of pushing back on empire.

What that looks like for you may be totally different from what it looks like for your neighbor. We all need to prayerfully consider what God is calling us to do. But as we conclude this series on Fear, we need to remember that Fear doesn't stop us.

So go forward this day knowing that God holds and uplifts you. We have nothing to fear for God is with us. Amen

