

Choose: Fear or Faith

Matthew 2:1-12

One of the challenges for pastors, even relatively new pastors like me, is preaching on the same texts every three years. These are stories the pastor and the congregation have heard repeatedly and know very well. How do you make the story fresh, how do we hear with new ears, what new understandings can we learn from something we seem to know so well? We have been focusing so closely on the miraculous birth of Jesus and joy to the world. Right now, all should be sunshine and rainbows, but as the story of Jesus progresses, we find this is not always the case. In this story we start to see the beginnings of the battle between fear and faith.

Let me set the scene. Despite what we view in our nativity scene here, the wise men, or Magi, didn't arrive on Joseph and Mary's doorstep until about two years after Jesus' birth. There was no air travel, bullet trains, or even GPS to get them from their hometown to Bethlehem quickly. Foot travel is a slow and tedious undertaking, so we should not be surprised that these men and their entourage show up a little later in Jesus' birth story. What would cause these men to take on such a long and arduous journey? Faith.

These men had learned of the promised coming Savior and had been scouring the skies for a sign. When they saw that special light in the

sky, they gathered their gifts, the supplies needed for such a lengthy trip, possibly even a note from the king offering them safe passage through other kingdoms on the way, then they set out. They did this because they believed in the promise, they had heard that this new king would bring peace among all peoples – Jews and Gentiles, believers, and pagans. Along the way they stopped several times to rest and ask people if they knew where this new king could be found.

Because they were seeking a king, they found their way to Jerusalem and the palace of Herod, the king. Herod was not a man of faith, but rather a man of fear. Herod was a builder of public works, restorer of the Temple in Jerusalem. He was also a murderer who killed his own sons out of fear that they threatened his position as king. When the Magi inquired about the birth of a new king, Herod was beyond fearful, he was vengeful. All of Jerusalem felt the fear and vengefulness of Herod and trembled. In order to secure his throne, Herod ordered all the male babies aged two and younger to be killed.

¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.

Matthew 2:17-19

Herod was made a fool and a villain because of his fear. The Savior of the world was born in Herod's own backyard and instead of embracing this development, he tried to thwart the will of God. This is a mistake often made by the rich and powerful. Don't be fooled though because this is a mistake that we can make as well.

Part of Herod's problem, which fueled his fears, was that he was not familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and so needed to ask the chief priests and scribes where this Savior was to be born. He is told the city of Bethlehem would be the site of this miracle. With a voice dripping with poisoned honey, Herod told the Magi to go to Bethlehem and then return to report the child's whereabouts to him so that he, too, might go and worship the child. In this way he hoped to carry out his vile plan of eliminating this baby king.

Although Herod pointed the way to Bethlehem, it was the star that led them to and finally rested above the abode of the Holy Family and alerted the Magi that they had finally arrived at their desired destination. "When they saw the star had stopped, they were overjoyed." Their faith rewarded; the Magi reacted with joy. Fear was nowhere to be found as Joseph opened the door to these distinguished guests. Although the home of Joseph and Mary was nothing out of the ordinary, hardly a palace to be sure, these men knew, through faith, that they had found what they had been seeking, all by God's grace.

While Joseph and Mary might have been taken aback at having such fine visitors at their door, they took it in stride. After all, they had already experienced announcing angels, shepherds coming from the fields as soon as the baby was born singing Hallelujah and telling everyone they knew about what had happened, and then there were the two old people in the Temple, Simeon and Anna, who spoke Jesus' true identity. The gifts brought by the Magi were fit for a king. Did the Magi really believe Jesus was the newborn king? Yes, as they were overcome with overwhelming joy at seeing firsthand heaven's joy. Though they may be dismissed as impure pagans, just as the shepherds were dismissed as the dregs of their society, God comes to all peoples in the birth of Jesus. As Simeon did attest:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised... you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.” Luke 2:29-32

While the Holy Family and the Magi were basking in the joy of God's saving gift, back in Jerusalem Herod had given in fully to his fear. Once again unleashing his murderous spirit on the innocents under his reign. His fear had prevented him from embracing the gift of God and instead continued through villainy to work to secure his position. Unfortunately for Herod, his fear would become his undoing.

The Magi had a choice of fear over faith. Remember their journey was long and of undetermined length, without a real promise of finding what

they were looking for. Yet these men chose to put faith above fear, the fear of not finding what they were seeking, the fear of the robbers that roamed the roads at night, the fear of never reaching their destination. Each of us faces the same choice. Not exactly like the Magi and Herod, but real choices in life that pit faith against fear.

As we live our lives in what is becoming an anything but ordinary world, we have the choice to respond as Herod, by becoming a threat to others around us, as well as ourselves. Or we can choose to respond in faith, trusting that God is in control and is still able to deliver on his promises to his people. We can exude the joy felt by the shepherds and the Magi. Every day we are faced with the choice to put faith above fear. We do this not once, but repeatedly as we encounter the different situations and people that impact our lives.

There is always the chance that we might choose fear over faith. The good news is that we can turn around and choose faith the next time. This is human nature, and we should not beat ourselves up, but rather make a conscious decision to choose faith the next time around. Those times when we choose faith over fear, we are taking one more step toward making this not only a choice, but a habit in our lives. As the habit grows within us, we will exhibit the joy that can be contagious to those around us.

So, as Joshua put the challenge to the people of Israel as they entered the Promised Land, “Choose today!” Will you be a Herod, who cannot

accept God's gift? Or will you be like the wise men from the East who were wise enough to travel toward wisdom, a wisdom that filled them with a before unknown joy? Choose wisely.

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