

Epiphany

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2023

Preachers: Jean Balcombe, Rev. Suzy Kirkham

[0 : 00] The reading is taken from Matthew chapter 2. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Magi, Herod from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea, they all replied, for this is what the prophet has written.

But you in Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, are by no means least amongst the rulers of Judah. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child.

[1 : 21] And as soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. What do we make of Herod?

What words or words would you use to describe him? This is where you get the chance to speak. Just shout out those words that you think you would like to describe Herod with.

Worried and fearful. Worried and we fearful. Anybody? Wicked. Weak. Weak. Ah, weak. Weasel. Weasel.

Ooh, we've got lots of Ws. Are we good? Embricitous. Ooh. I don't know what it means, but it's exciting. It sounds good. That's where you put the preacher on their metal.

Cunning. Cunning. Any else? Crafty. Crafty. I like the alliteration here. We're getting, you know, we seem to go in a little bit of a pattern.

[2 : 25] King Herod was a bit of a tyrant, wasn't he? And thought nothing of killing one of his wives, three of his sons, 300 court officials, the slaughter of notable men of Jericho, so that there would be weeping and wailing at his funeral.

That's sometime in the future. He was not a nice man. He was paranoid about power and reacted aggressively to any perceived threat to that power.

Irascible is a word that comes to mind to describe infamy. But what he didn't realise was that he really had no power at all, or at best, a tenuous, fragile power.

King Herod, we heard, was disturbed, and when he heard about the travelling magi, that this new baby had been born, who was going to be the king of the Jews. Other translations variously used, very disturbed, very upset, troubled, terrified, frightened.

I think we get the message. Herod was the king of the Jews, was he not? So why was he so bothered? Well, he wasn't exactly the king of the Jews.

[3 : 35] You see, Herod's title, the king of the Jews, was given to him by the Romans. He was previously a governor and had made himself useful to Rome in the civil wars of Palestine.

He was called Herod the Great and deserved the title in many ways. He was a great builder. He was instrumental in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. He could be generous, believe it or not.

In times of difficulty, he remitted the taxes to make things easier for the people. But despite all his good works, he was not really out to please anyone but himself.

He'd been king for a long time, but still he felt threatened, and as we heard, lashed out to protect his position, his status at all costs. We might look around at figures in the world today like Mr. Putin being an obvious candidate and see something of Herod in them.

But I would suggest that before we get too excited, I wonder if we might not examine ourselves. If we think about it, each of us exercises some power or authority in our own lives, however small or insignificant that might be.

[4 : 52] It's worth considering just where that is and how we exercise it. What would pose a threat to the little power we have?

What does Herod's fear say to us and the powerful in the world today? It struck me as I pondered over this reading that no angel appeared to Herod saying, do not be afraid.

Like the angel Gabriel had visited Mary or the angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph or the angel of the Lord who appeared to the shepherds. Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will bring great joy for all the world, all the people.

But Herod didn't see it like that. He hadn't heard it. Probably because he was a bit half-hearted in his faith of God. He was half-Jew and he was seeking to please himself as we heard.

He didn't or wouldn't open his heart and mind to the real king. And as a result, he lived in fear. His instruction to the Magi to come back and tell him when they'd found the baby so that he could go and worship them was really not what he was going to do at all.

[6 : 14] And perhaps the question begged of us is, is our desire to worship Jesus, the baby, the man, the saviour of the world, with an open heart and an open mind?

Just as we heard at the beginning, the little boy who went to adore Jesus was something Herod would never do.

But we know that with the love of God, there is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.

Would we not pray that for those who are in power today, that they would know God's love, that the fear that drives them may be dispelled?

After they had heard the king, they went on their way. And the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

[7 : 29] When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. And on coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

So the Magi, they set out to follow a star. God is found in the moments of wonder that make us stop and ponder the mystery.

So what have been your own awakening moments of wonder that have led you deeper into mystery? The star's light was seen in the darkness.

In their darker moments, they trusted that the light was still to be found. How have you experienced the dark? Where or how did you recognize the light?

[8 : 53] They asked questions when they were lost. Continuing to try to make sense of where they were and where they were being led, they looked for help.

What are the questions you live with? Who are wisdom figures for you? Who has helped you with your questions?

They traveled together. We don't know how many of them, but we can imagine the little community that they became as they traveled together sharing this experience.

Where do you experience community? And what does this add to your journeying? They met Herod on the way.

For his own reasons of power and control, he tried to deceive them. We need to recognize the twisted value systems of our own world and not get caught up in them or be misled by them.

[10 : 01] So what ways are you most often pulled off course? They bowed down in adoration.

Falling on their knees, they worshipped the king. A moment beyond intellectual understanding and of recognition. We can imagine that moment of knowing in the deep silence.

Do you cultivate silence in your life so that there can be moments of knowing and of recognition?

They offered their gifts.

To be in the presence demanded a response, an offering of themselves and of their gifts. So think about your own gifts. What are you offering of yourself, your time and your material possessions?

In a dream, they were shown the truth. Because of the danger, they were warned to return by a different way.

[11 : 07] Revelation can come to us through our dreams. Have you ever experienced this? And how else do you experience God's revealing of the way to you?

In a moment, we're going to have some music to reflect and pray through. And there may be these questions that you might want to think about as the music is playing.

So name and give thanks for a moment of wonder. Resolve to offer your gift this year in a particular way. Name some aspect of darkness and pray for light to enter it.

And name a companion on the journey and give thanks for their support. And just thinking about our gifts, however lowly we think we are, however we think we may not have any gifts, we have all got something to bring.

And in the song, I just love this little, this verse that it says here. Here in the dusty ground, I bow with kings, where wise men then laid before their offerings.

[12 : 29] I lay no golden crown here at your feet, but just this, my broken life, I offer thee. Amen.