

**The Choice of Fear:
January 9, 2021**

There was a little girl **[1 Empty]**
Who came home from school one day,
And her mother met her at the door:

Hi! How was school today? How are you doing?

With the honesty of little people, the girl replied,
Oh, not so good, mommy.
My tummy hurts!

Now of course... Mothers know everything,
And this mommy had the cure:
Well, that's probably because
You don't have anything in it.
Let's get you something to eat!

And sure enough, after a snack,
The girl's tummy didn't ache anymore.

So the mom had to go to the store
To pick up a couple things for supper...
And the little girl was left home...
With her big sister.

When the phone rang...
The little girl answered it politely.
Turned out... it was the Pastor.

"Hello!" She said. "How are you today?"

"Well," he replied, "to tell you the truth, I've got a bit of a headache!"

And before he could go any further,
The young girl had him diagnosed:
My mommy says that's probably
Because you don't have anything in it!

Now... one problem with empty headed people...
Is that we tend to make assumptions.
Without thinking things all the way through.

Like we think we know what people are like...
Before we get to know them...
And hear about their life experiences...

Like we think we know what a story is all about...
Even before we read it...
Or hear it.

Like the story we have today.

There are all kinds of things we assume...
I'll mention a couple later.
But the first one...
Is about old King Herod. **[2 Herod]**

In our memory...
It's easy to make King Herod...
Into a caricature of evil incarnate...

We exaggerate and embellish...
To make him the bad guy...
And the wise men... the magi...
The three kings from the East...
The good guys.

But you know...
Life is NEVER that simple.
And we are not that naive.

To think that anyone...
Can be categorized...
As purely evil...
Or purely good.

Humans don't work that way.
We are both.
Simultaneously.
Saint and sinner.

So. I would propose to you...
That to a certain extent...
King Herod misunderstood.

I don't think... he acted the way that he did...
And said the things that he said...
Because he was just pure evil.

I think he did those things...
Because he was incredibly insecure.
He was afraid of what was happening.

He didn't understand...
How God was working...
And moving...
In the world around him.

It was scary.

Listen. Here's what Herod knew: **[3 Star]**

There was a star shining in the sky...
That was not there before.

And it was significant enough...
To gain the attention...
Of these wise guys...
These astrologers...
From the East.

They thought...
It was an omen.
A sign.
A pointer.
Worth following.
Something is happening...
That is going to impact everything...
The whole world.

But this cosmic event...
Was completely...
Beyond the control.
Of King Herod.

it was happening in his part of the world.
His jurisdiction... if you will...
But he had nothing...
To do with it.

He didn't know.
He didn't understand.
What was going on!

Now. Let me just stop here for just a minute. **[4 Control]**
How many of you...
Have felt completely...
Out of control...
At some point in your life?

Raise your hand.

Now... leave your hand up...
If you enjoyed feeling...
Completely out of control...

Of course not.
When we feel out of control.
We do everything within our power...
To regain a sense...
That we are in control.

So that what King Herod tried to do.

But on some level... King Herod also knew...
What the wise men...
Were talking about.

He was raised in the Jewish faith. **[5 Prophecies]**

He was taught the words of the prophets...

The promises they proclaimed...

In the name of God...

He knew the prophets said...

Someone was coming.

The Messiah.

The Savior.

Who would restore...

The children of Israel.

Everybody would experience...

The blessing of God.

And the whole world would reset.

Which is not necessarily good news...

When you're living a good life.

When you are sitting in a palace...

Surrounded by opulence and power...

And running water.

Herod's life was awesome.

It wasn't exactly a good time...

For God to be acting in the world.

Maybe God could come back...

When life wasn't so good.

I know I mentioned this before...

But back when the pandemic started...

I wrote on our chalkboard...

In the basement...

Happy Apocalypse.

As a joke.

But since then...

I think people have looked at the events...

Of this world...

And said...

Well... maybe it's the end.

And so how do people... prepare for the apocalypse.

By buying... gold... or supplies...

Or guns.

All kinds of things...

To make themselves feel better.

When the truth of our faith is...
If this were the apocalypse.
IF God were breaking into our world...
Once and for all...
To finally make everything right.

Why would you need gold?
Or supplies?
Or guns?

If it's the end of time...
And the return of Christ...
And the fulfillment of all the prophecy...

Aren't we supposed to say...
Come Lord Jesus.
I'm ready.
It's ok.
You are my God.
And I believe in You?

Let's get this going!

Anyhow... if the Messiah was born.
If the prophecy was being fulfilled.
If God was working in the world.

You would have thought...
That King Herod...
The Jewish puppet king...
For the Roman government...
But still Jewish...

Would have said...
Ok. Come on God.
Do your thing.
I'm ready.
I'm willing.
Make your Messiah known.

But instead... he was scared.
He was afraid of losing things.
His position.
His power.
His advantage.

So... he did what all people do...
When they feel out of control.
He tried to gather information. Intel...
Knowledge.

We still do that.
We watch the news.
We google everything...

Because you don't have to wonder anything anymore...
You can get an answer on the internet...
Something to hold onto...
Even if the answer is WRONG!

But information gives us confidence...
So that we can act...

Herod gathered information...
So that he could act...
So he could stop...
What?

The Messiah?
The baby born in Bethlehem?
The work of God?

That's it. Right?
Because he was afraid...
To lose his perceived "good life" ...
Herod wanted to stop God.

Ok. Enough about him.
Let's switch gears...
Let's talk about the stars...
Of our Epiphany celebration.
Let's talk about the Wise Men. **[6 Wise Guys]**

These three (???)... three??? Nope.
Please note...
The bible does not say three...

We just assume that...
Because there are three gifts mentioned.
Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh.
There were also three Wise Men...

There could have been two...
Or fifty. We don't know.
And... it's not important.
This is important.

We know that King Herod...
Operated out of a sense of fear.
He was frightened and troubled...
By the birth of this potential Messiah.

But the Wise Men...
Operated out a sense of fear too.
But it's different kind of fear.

You know in the Small Catechism... **[7 Commands]**
Written by Martin Luther...

When he explains the Ten Commandments...
He begins each explanation...
With the words...
We are to fear and love God.

Now... I don't think he means...
That we are supposed to be constantly terrified of God...
That doesn't seem to the gospel that Jesus taught.

Too many people really think...
That if I make a mistake...
Or if I'm a bad person...
Or if I don't live up...
To what God expects of me...

I will be cursed.
Or punished.
Or damned to Hell.

Not that kind of fear.

We are to fear God...
In the sense...
That our hearts...
Are filled with awe.

In the sense that we get overwhelmed...
By the sheer power and expanse...
Of our God.

In the sense that we can't even begin to understand...
The depth and width and height...
Of God's love for us.

Like the Psalmist... wrote in Psalm 8... **[8 Psalm]**

When I look at your heavens...
The work of your fingers
The moon and the stars
That you have established...

What we we... human beings...
That you are mindful of us?
What are mortals...
That you care for us?

That's what the Wise Men were feeling.
The overwhelming opportunity...
To come before God...
In a moment...
When God was working... powerfully...
Lovingly... amazingly...
In the world.

Wouldn't you be humbled?
Wouldn't you be intimidated?
Wouldn't you be filled with absolute wonder?

Wouldn't you be filled...
With fear... and love?
To follow that star...
And to know that God was doing something...
Wonderful?

They were. So...

They came to worship.
They came to see the fulfillment of the prophecy.
They came to see what that star was all about.

They came to see...
This child.
Who was born...
King of the Jews.

Even though...
They didn't know...
No one knew...
Exactly what that meant...

For this baby Jesus to be...
The King of the Jews.

That one day... he would...
Have a sign over his head...
As he hung on the cross.
That said... this is King of the Jews.

But now... when they found him.
They bowed down.
They knelt before him.
Paid him homage.
Respect.
Honor.

These grown up men.
With hearts filled with awe.
Humbled themselves.
In the sight of the Lord.

See. That's the difference.

King Herod was afraid...
Of everything he was going to lose.
All he could think about was...
How much this baby king...
Was going to cost him.

The Wise Men...
Were afraid that something big...
Was happening.
That God was working...
In the world...

And they might miss...
The opportunity...
To be a part of God's work.

And you know...
That sense of awe...
Did not come cheaply. **[9 Cost]**

The Wise Men lost all kinds of things.
In the process of seeking Jesus.

It cost them.
To travel a great distance.
It cost them.
To give up their time... a portion of their lives.
To find him.
It cost them.
To bring these ridiculously expensive gifts.
To someone they didn't even know.

And then.

It cost them... their pride.
To bow down... before the child.
It cost them... their faith.
To worship him.
It cost them... safety and security...
To defy King Herod...

It cost them a lot.

But they weren't thinking about...
What they were going to lose.

They were thinking about...
What the world...
Was in the process of gaining.

And so it goes.
And so it has always gone.

Jesus said.
Whoever wants to save their life...
Will lose it.
But whoever loses their life for me.
For my sake.
Will find it.

Over and over again.
In God's word.
There is an emphasis.
That God doesn't intend for us...
To cling to this life...
As though this life...
Is all that God has given us.

God doesn't intend for us...
To hold on... to everything we have...
With artificial hope...
With a temporary sense of security...
That makes us feel good...
For the moment.

But instead.
God wants us to cling to God.
To place our hope in our God.
To humble ourselves...
In the sight of the Lord.

To lose our lives...
In the wonder...
In the awesomeness...
In the glory of our God.

And to reverently receive...
The gift of this Christ.

On Christmas Eve 1968... **[10 Reasoner]**

Harry Reasoner wrote a piece
About Christmas
For the show "60 Minutes,"

He said;
The basis for this tremendous burst
Of buying things and gift giving and parties and near hysteria,
Is a quiet event that happened a long time ago.

You can say that in all societies
There has always been a midwinter festival,
And that many of the trappings of our Christmas
Are almost violently pagan,

But you come back to the central fact of the day...
The birth of God on earth.
It leaves you only three ways
Of accepting Christmas.

One is cynically,
As a time to make money
Or endorse the making of it.

One is graciously,
The appropriate attitude
For non-Christians,
Who wish their fellow citizens
All the joys their beliefs entitle them.

And the third, of course, is reverently.
If this is the anniversary
Of the appearance of the Lord
Of the Universe as a helpless babe –
It is a very important day.

So that's the question... isn't it? **[11 Fear]**
How will we choose...
To approach Christ today?

Will it be out of a sense of fear...
Thinking **ONLY** about...
How much it will cost... me...

What I have to give up...

That I might just have to...
Let go of the idea...
That this life...
Is all I have.

That these worldly things...
Are the most important things...
I will ever possess.

That I AM... in control...
That I AM... the center of the universe.
That I AM... significant and important...
In and of myself.

Or will it be out of a sense of fear...
The kind that is... according to the Bible...
The beginning of wisdom...

The fear of God...
Is the beginning of wisdom.

Will I trust God?
Will I let go?

Will I allow...
My heart to reverently worship...
This child?
And place all my hope in him?

Will I believe?

That's what lies before us.
So I invite you...
In the name of the Lord God.

To make that choice...
In fear and love...

Humbly bow down.
And in reverence...
And joy...
And hope.
Worship Jesus the Christ...

Thanks be to God.
Amen!