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## What do you fear?

Fear doesn't stop us

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing unto you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

## **Sermon**

Today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany is actually on Tuesday this year as it always falls on January 6. I long thought it was called Epiphany because the magi had the epiphany of recognizing Jesus as a king, but in actuality, it's simply meant to indicate the appearance of Jesus into the world. A fact that was perhaps best or most famously marked by the visit of the magi.

What a journey we've had to get here from that first Sunday of Advent. We talked then about the cruelty of King Herod. And Herod's desperation to come to and stay in power creates the backdrop for the entire birth narrative of Jesus. And today it comes into focus once again.

Herod had come to power through a combination of political maneuvering, Roman backing, and military force. Herod was the son of a politician—perhaps he had an early taste of power. His father made him governor of Galilee which features in future stories during Jesus' life. Herod convinced the Roman Senate of his loyalty to Rome, then used Roman legions to conquer Judea in a war that took three years.

Now situated in a place of power with the power of Rome backing him, I'm sure he could not afford any true or apparent weakness. The Romans would not put up with anything that resembled a crack in their kingdom.

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We talked about how Herod killed his own family members when he suspected, perhaps without evidence, that they might be plotting against him. Even his 'favorite wife'. And I mentioned how he made plans for beloved leaders to be slaughtered immediately upon news of his death so that there would be mourning at the time of his death—even if that mourning was not actually for him.

This was a man who was surely diagnosably paranoid and a narcissist. Mental wellness was not understood then as well as now, but it is clear he needed help. But when you're at the top and like Herod, who is going to actually tell you that?

In the Roman world, orders were obeyed without question from the top down. Not only from the emperor, but at every level. Did you know that during the rule of the Romans, any Roman could, at any time, ask a civilian to carry their gear for them for a mile and the civilian was compelled to do so without asking questions.

Thirty years hence from our passage today, Jesus would tell his followers, recorded in Matthew 5, that when asked to go a mile, they should go not one, but two. Often interpreted as Christians showing love and grace, it was most certainly an act of subversion, showing the soldiers they could not define the actions of individuals and disempowering them in an unexpected way. It is from this situation that we get our phrase about going the extra mile.

So during this time of Jesus' birth, this gives you a small glimpse into the atmosphere of the times into which Jesus is born. But more importantly

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today, the political environment into which the magi walked on their traverse “afar”.

As the magi enter the scene, they are entering a space and place that is volatile at best. I can’t imagine they were so naive as to not know that there were huge political risks, but as people trained to watch the celestial bodies, it seems they could not ignore the enormity of what they had observed. And likely, they probably assumed that was true for others as well. When the heavens speak, surely people listen.

But when they presented themselves as seeking the one born King of the Jews, Herod went into a panic. He summoned all who might know anything about such events. Remember he had won rule over the Jews on behalf of Caesar with three years of violence and bloodshed. He was not going to lose his position and his power because of the birth of a helpless baby that no one had bothered to mention to him. His paranoia was in full form and his only path was to seek out and destroy the competition and anyone who had sought to keep this news from him.

And so he sent the magi off with very specific commands to come back and tell him exactly how to find this child who represented a deep threat to his hard fought position.

So the magi went on their way. But hear this. Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee has an interesting take on the visit of the Magi. She points out that the Greek word for magi, “magoi” has no number or gender associated with it. These magoi could have been a couple of people, or could have been

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many. But the tradition from which they came—and the term is Persian, so they were likely of the Zoroastrian tradition—bestowed this term upon men and women alike. The magi could have been a mixed gender group or all women coming to visit this young mother and child.

To me, this comes as refreshing. The idea of kings entering a new mom's space has always felt overwhelming and disempowering. But what if these magoi were women who arrived with an experiential understanding of what Mary had just gone through. And they came as outsiders . . . gentiles . . . to this place where they, as outsiders, were the first to recognize the birth of Christ. And I wonder if their visit as outsiders, in some small way, prepared Mary and Joseph for their soon-to-come journey to a place where they would be the outsiders.

By seeking him and continuing on to find him, the magi have made a political statement. One that threatens the powers that be. But things are turned on their heads yet again in this story. Already a Messiah born to a carpenter and a young girl is unexpected. Now he's recognized by outsiders. But it gets even more strange.

The young family is not protected by armies or edicts. They are protected by foreigners. They are protected by angels. They are protected by dreams. And kudos to the magi who choose to listen to dreams over threats. Having seen this child, they leave transformed. They take a new path as changed people. They did not let fear have the last word.

Rev. Dr. Lee says:

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Epiphanies are not always warm or personal.  
Sometimes they are disruptive, even dangerous.  
Sometimes they lead to confrontation with empire.  
Sometimes they ask us to cross borders.  
Sometimes they send us home by another way.  
And always, they ask something of us:  
Will we move the way fear makes us move?  
Or will we move the way love calls us to?  
And how do we find that way? How do we listen to that nagging voice as  
we listen to news stories and human interest stories. How do we watch  
empire and yet choose dreams. How do we note paranoia and choose  
another way. I don't think it's clear what that way will be, but I do know  
that it will be characterized by hope. It will be led by dreams. It will be  
characterized by love. And it is not a time for solos . . . like the magi, we  
need to walk it together. Amen.