

Message: "Recognition"

Do you recognize Jesus in your life each day? That's a good question. Here's Gwen's response:

"My teenage daughter Grace has a unique way of seeing Jesus in daily life. The other day she showed me how marshmallows lined up on top of her hot chocolate to form a cross. She delights in such things as a lighted cross on a hillside when we're driving on the interstate at night.

For her these things are glimpses of Jesus, evidence he's personally involved in the details of her days. I have a couple of friends at work who are like this as well.

One told me a story of how she was having a bad morning; nothing going right at home or in the office. She looked down to see two rubber bands on the floor in the shape of a cross, and it reminded her Jesus was with her. She was able to find peace and carry on, hope restored.

[Gwen says] I think I must be the meanest person alive when people tell me things like this. Because even though I would never show outward disrespect, inwardly I'm a doubter. I suppose it's because I never see Jesus this way.

And if it wasn't my own sweet, beautiful daughter sharing her heart with me, or a dear friend at work, I'd think it was crazy. I'd be tempted to judge. And I'd be wrong.

The Bible promises those who search for God with all of their hearts will find God. And whether God aligns marshmallows or rubber bands for our benefit really isn't the point.

The point is the heart. Is my heart soft enough to see Jesus in a sunset? To feel his love in the kiss of the wind on my face? Is my office door open to him? Is my home open to him? If I judge these things as nutty, I'm the one who is missing out."¹

Gwen's response is open, authentic and shows a good awareness of her own personality and nature. She knows she's a doubter, yet she's willing to be open to other people and situations which are outside of her normal experience. That's a good lesson for today.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/daily-devotionals/devotions-for-faith-prayer/see-jesus-in-your-daily-life>

When we're faced with something supernatural or unexpected, there are often two, different responses: curiosity or fear. Gwen shows us that. So do the magi and Herod in Matthew's account of Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:1-12).

There are a lot of details in Matthew's narrative which raise questions about the specifics. Where was the house? How did the star lead them? Who were the magi and where did they come from? What did Herod know? We're curious people. We want to know. And that's not a bad thing, so long as we don't miss the big point.

The story is about who Jesus is. The magi - foreigners and true outsiders, recognize Jesus as king, while his own people – those in the know, the insiders, don't have a clue. It's kind of strange, isn't it? Maybe the years wore them down or their self-interest closed their hearts and minds to the Spirit's nudge. I think it's helpful for us in our lives to compare the responses of Herod and the magi to this world-changing event.

There are two, key points to consider. The first is the contrast between Herod and Jesus. The second is the contrast between Herod and the magi.

The contrast between Herod the Great and Jesus is about what it means to be sovereign, to be a ruler. Matthew gives Herod the title of king in Matthew 2:1, 3 and 9. The magi ask Herod where the king of the Jews has been born in verse 2. Jesus is identified as a ruler in verse 6. Matthew is drawing our attention to two types of rulers and two types of kingdoms. There is the authority of Herod versus the authority of Jesus.

Herod the Great was a harsh ruler. He was a tyrant. Sure, he did some good things. Herod the Great was a builder. But he's known for his all-consuming desire to preserve his own status and power. Herod will stop at nothing, including the murder of innocent children, to realize his self-serving goals.

Matthew records Herod's horrific actions in vv16-18,
“When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to

the time he had learned from the magi. This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

*A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and much grieving.
Rachel weeping for her children, and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more” (Jeremiah 31:15).*

It would be nice to say Herod was a once-in-a-lifetime exception, but that wouldn't be true. The world is filled with people who see the end as justifying the means. They will do whatever they see fit to satisfy their own selfish desires, even when it harms others, is not good and doesn't align to God's will.

Jesus is a different kind of ruler. He's a shepherd, one who tends to those under his care. Micah and Matthew see who he really is. Jesus is a loving ruler, who wants to save his people from destruction. He even dies for them so they'd be saved from their sins (Matthew 20:28).

The contrast with Herod couldn't be more stark. Jesus gives his life for the sake of others. Herod takes the lives of others for his own sake.

This tension between Herod's kingdom and the kingdom of Jesus points to the conflict between this world and the kingdom of God. The desire for power and control is part of this world, particularly the attitude of militant self-rule. When we ourselves are the only authority we recognize, we are far from heaven.

We must reflect on our own lives and motivations. It's important to determine where the spirit of Herod is present to any degree in our hearts. For those of us who see a bit of Herod in ourselves, we are challenged by this narrative. We need to change if we are to follow in the way. Matthew offers hope in the words of Jesus, “*Change your life. God's kingdom is [near]*” (4:17, MSG).

But perhaps we're misjudging Herod or those who have a bit of Herod in them. Maybe we're being too rigid. The second contrast, between Herod and the magi, the wise ones, provides another lens for us to use. Maybe self-serving ambition and authority are okay, people don't need to change.

Matthew shows us the difference between Herod and the magi in their response to Jesus, the promised Messiah. The response of the magi – these outsiders, is very appropriate for who he is. They seek Jesus (v2), and when they have found him they rejoice (v10).

Immediately, they worship Jesus – even as a child (vv2, 11a), and offer him gifts worthy of the ruler he is (v11b). This is a model for us, as disciples, for how we are to be with Jesus.

On the other hand, Herod's response is completely different.

He's disturbed and upset when he hears the news (v3). Then Herod engages in deception – a secret meeting (v7), lying (v8) and murder (v16), seeking to destroy Jesus. He'll go to any length to preserve his status and position, even when he's working against his own best interest. After all, Jesus came to save Herod as well!

The magi worship Jesus while Herod seeks to kill him. For Matthew, there's no middle group. To him, it's clear. Those who will not recognize and worship Jesus as the Messiah – our Savior, will reject him and seek his destruction.

But there's hope. God intervened in the lives of the magi. God intervened in the lives of Joseph, Mary and Jesus. God used dreams to guide them. They were open to spiritual experiences. So they saw the visions and took action. The magi avoided Herod and went a long way around Jerusalem to go home. Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt to avoid Herod's rage. Later, they settled in Nazareth.

But God did more. The plan was already underway. John had been born. And he prepared the way for Jesus' public life and ministry. John was part of the salvation story that changes lives.

Today is the first Sunday of epiphany. The word epiphany comes from the Greek and can be translated simply as "the light shines." It refers to the manifestation of some sort light, which could be knowledge, understanding, or even relationship, spiritual awakening or spiritual presence. The magi represent the world that comes to see something of significance in the baby in Bethlehem, even when many of those closest don't see it.

We all have darkness – shadows, in our heart and mind. We may have a bit of Herod in us. Rather than jaded insiders who focus on the negative, let's be something else. Let's be like those wise ones, on a long journey on a path we don't know to an unknown place, seeking life. Life lived wholly and completely now. Life that is spiritual and material, mindful and heartfelt, passionate and faithful, loving and hopeful. Let's embrace the positive, life-giving message and way of Jesus.

Let's have ears to hear, voices to speak, minds to devote and bodies to put into action. We've caught a glimpse of something marvelous. So let's gather and lean into the hope we have in someone greater than us. Let's embrace Jesus knowing we become part of the light when we do, so others might see in us the light of Christ. Then we can be filled with joy for the light we see in one another. And we can give thanks to God for this vision in the darkness.

God can be seen in a kaleidoscope of ways. Let's always remember as we sing about the light and as we pray for the light. Come, Jesus, shine your light in us!

Isaiah 60:1-6 (CEB)

Arise! Shine! Your light has come;
the Lord's glory has shone upon you.

Though darkness covers the earth
and gloom the nations,
the Lord will shine upon you;
God's glory will appear over you.

Nations will come to your light
and kings to your dawning radiance.

Lift up your eyes and look all around:
they are all gathered; they have come to you.

Your sons will come from far away,
and your daughters on caregivers' hips.

Then you will see and be radiant;
your heart will tremble and open wide,
because the sea's abundance will be turned over to you;
the nations' wealth will come to you.

Countless camels will cover your land,
young camels from Midian and Ephah.

They will all come from Sheba,
carrying gold and incense,
proclaiming the Lord's praises.

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel.”*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.