

Between Longing And Fear – An Epiphany Sermon On Matthew 2:1-12

I recently overheard a man say, “I do not want to work until I’m too old to live.”

He did not elaborate or explain what he meant but his words have stuck with me. I think it’s one of those statements that says more than the words that were spoken. My guess is that it’s not really even about his work. After all, life and work do not have to be mutually exclusive. People find life and meaning in their work, and work can be an essential part of a fulfilling life. I think he was taking about more than just work.

I wonder if maybe he was talking about his longing, desire, and searching for something - something MORE. And I wonder if he was talking about his fear – the fear of missing out, losing a part of himself, and living less than fully alive.

Admittedly, those are my interpretations, but I think the experiences of longing and fear are universal. I recognize both in my life and I’ve seen them in the lives of others. For most of us it’s probably not one OR the other, but BOTH - at the same time. We live between the two poles of longing and fear. And today’s gospel (Matthew 2:1-12) tells us that’s where epiphany lies. It lies amidst our longing and fear.

Longing and fear are the bookends on epiphany. At one end you have Magi ... following the star. They’ve left their own country – the familiar, the usual, the known – in search of and desiring something new and maybe even unknown. They do not know where this journey will take them, only that they MUST take this journey. It’s as if there is a call on their lives that cannot be left unanswered. Who or what is calling is unknown. There is no caller ID with an epiphany.

At the other end is Herod, the bookend of fear. “*he was troubled,*” Matthew tells us, “*and all Jerusalem with him.*” He is threatened by the possibility of a new king. His power and identity are at risk of being lost. Maybe he fears an impoverished and diminished life. He calls others to himself – chief priests and scribes – but he stays where he is, grasping and clinging to what is familiar and known.

The Magi and Herod are responding to the same **thing**; the Manifestation of God in human form - the child and the birth of new life. The Magi are open and give themselves to something new and maybe even unknown. Herod is closed and wants the same old thing. The Magi travel and search. Herod hunkers down and hides in place.

The Magi follow their longing. Herod wallows in his fear. Both, however, were about the child. Both were... an epiphany.

I think we tend to hear the Epiphany story as being an epiphany to the Magi only. But what if it's also an epiphany to Herod too? We know that Satan uses shame, doubt, and especially fear to drive our sinful selves, to separate us from the loving relationship with our Living God. And we can see that in Herod's response to the Good News of the newborn King.

I am not talking about epiphany in the usual sense of having a flash of insight or a sudden realization. I do not think that's what today's gospel is about. I've come to believe that we do not have epiphanies but that they have us. Epiphanies are not so much those moments when we say, "Aha, I've got it!" They are, rather, moments when we say, "Ah, it's got me!" (longings) or "Oh no, it's got me!" (fears). Sometimes that happens in our longings and other times it happens in our fears.

Both situations are offering us something. And both are seeking a response from us. That's what epiphanies do. They give us a glimpse of ourselves, our life, our world, and then they call for and ask a response. That response is what distinguishes the Magi from Herod.

The difference is not that epiphany happened for the Magi but not Herod. The difference is that the Magi observed and followed the star, opened their treasure chest, worshiped the newborn King, then "*they departed to their own country by another way,*" and Herod did not. But... think about this... what if he had?

What if Herod had observed and followed the star too? What if he had opened the treasure chest of his life? What if he had worshiped the newborn King and then returned home "*by another way?*" How might his life have changed? What if he had NOT allowed FEAR to rule his life?

And what if we did those things? How might our lives be changed? How might our congregation be changed? Hmmm . . .

When I look at my longings and fears, when others tell me about their longings and fears, when I remember the words of that man I overheard – I am convinced that both the Magi and Herod are parts of ourselves. And I am equally convinced that wherever there is longing or fear there is an epiphany awaiting our response. So let me ask you about your longings and fears...

What longing, searching, or desiring has gotten ahold of you? Picture the people who are involved. Describe what is happening. Feel the ache deep within you, that ache that hurts so good. What is calling to you today? What is being asked of you in the name of God? What matters so much to you that when you ignore it, it becomes the matter with you? For what do you hope? What future are you desiring that sounds to you impossible? What future excites you?

What fears have gotten ahold of you? Again, picture the faces, name the people, describe the situations, feel the adrenaline – that fight or flight response. What keeps you paralyzed and unable to leave the place where you are? What is it about your life or relationships you least want to face and deal with? Who or what situation creates waves of panic and anxiety in your gut? What do you most fear losing? What is fear teaching you about yourself, your life, your relationships? What would you do if you were not afraid and how would your life be different? What is being asked of you in the name of God? And how can Faith overcome that fear?

Whatever your answers are to those questions about longings and fears, they describe an epiphany. They are a star in the sky of your life – waiting to be observed and followed. They are the treasure chest of your life waiting to be opened. They are the child – and the insistence - of new life waiting to be held!

And in all that, something is being revealed to you - the manifestation of Christ, and something is being asked of you; love, forgiveness, healing, hope, gratitude, courage, beauty, compassion, gentleness with yourself or another, mercy, acceptance of yourself or another, nonviolence, repentance, new life, truth telling, wisdom.

Are not those the very qualities and values of the child whose life the Magi and Herod seek? They are at the **heart** of our deepest longings – and on the other side of our worst fears. And they reveal Immanuel – manifested. God. With. Us. **That’s** the epiphany – and it’s always before us – with insistence, calling and waiting for a response.

The response to the Son of God/Son of Man taking the punishment that we deserved and dying on the cross in our stead. The response to His rising on the Third Day to new life, and the promise that we can live a Resurrection Life. The response to Christ reigning in all creation, with Victory over Sin, Death, and Satan. The response to God sending his only begotten Son to live in our midst – even today. The response to having His Body and Blood, shed for us, to eat and drink this day – with the assurance of sins forgiven and everlasting love. The response to living in His love with Faith in Christ overcoming **all** of our fears!

What will you do with the epiphany before you today? How will you respond?

My hope for you, me, and this congregation is that today we will all go home “*by another way.*” With Faith in Christ!

Trusting in Jesus’ Name. AMEN.