

Solemnity of the Epiphany, 2017
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond
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I'm dreaming of a white Epiphany...

Even though all of the stores have converted to their Valentine's Day decorations, the Catholic liturgical calendar says that we are still in the Christmas season... until Monday. So, technically, we *did* have a white Christmas after all!

The Epiphany story is one of my favorite parts of the whole Christmas narrative. What's not to love? Strange visitors from the East. A miraculous light in the sky. The adoration by the magi. The gifts. It makes for great paintings, and great music!

But if you read the Gospel closely, you realize that the painters and musicians added some of my favorite details. For instance – Matthew never says that there are THREE magi. There are three *gifts*, but Matthew never tells us how many *magi* there are. Maybe two or three went in together on the Gold? And Matthew never calls them 'kings.' The musicians, poets and artists added some those details later.

And there is one guy that we often overlook in the story... the one who really seems to understand what is at stake. We did not sing about him in the opening song. And that man is – *King Herod*. If Herod gets talked about at all on Epiphany, he is portrayed as the villain who is trying to kill the baby of Bethlehem.

But...of all the people in Matthew's story, I think Herod is the one who most clearly understands what all of this means.

Think about it. When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, they ask Herod: "where is the newborn king of the Jews?" And Herod understands that they are not just looking for the next *political* leader of Israel, because Herod immediately calls in his theological experts and he asks them, "Where is the CHRIST supposed to be born." The Christ. God's son. Herod understands that the magi are looking for *God in the flesh*.

And what is Herod's reaction to the news that God may have been born in Bethlehem? Matthew says, "When Herod heard this, he was *greatly troubled*."

"*Greatly troubled?*" Herod appears to understand that if Jesus truly is God in the flesh, then that changes everything. If Jesus is God in the flesh, then Herod and every other political leader *should* be afraid. Because if people commit themselves to following this child, then God – not *politics* – becomes the ultimate priority in people's lives.

If people decide to follow this child, then God, not money, becomes the true *good* of a human life. If people follow this child, then Christ gets to define justice – not government. If this child really is God, then the entire power structure of our world gets changed. Politicians, business leaders, pop stars, people who control others through fear or violence...have just lost their control over human beings. *Because the baby in the manger is God.*

Herod understands who Jesus is...and he is terrified. Because HEROD takes Jesus seriously.

But Herod did not know that there IS one way to neutralize the dangerous truth about the child in the manger.

I saw an example of it on a cable TV program a few Decembers ago. One commentator said, “I don’t have anything against Jesus. In fact, I really respect Jesus. He was one of the greatest religious teachers that ever lived. I just don’t think he’s God. But I still respect Jesus.”

You may know people who would agree with that statement. But here’s the problem: either Jesus IS who he says he is, or he is a *liar*. Either Jesus is God in the flesh, or he is a great deceiver.

Everyone in the Christmas story: from the angel Gabriel, to Mary and Joseph, to John the Baptist, to the angel choir, to the shepherds, and the magi... they all point to Jesus and say, “he’s God.” That’s why Herod shook with fear!

And when Jesus starts preaching, he claims to be God’s son, God in the flesh! Jesus made it crystal clear – *he’s God*. So we have to listen to him. And follow him. And serve him. And do what he did. And if we don’t, we are ignoring God!

Jesus said – “I will give you eternal life.” Now friends – If Jesus is lying about that...you should not be here. If he is telling the truth – then your life belongs to him.

The entire Christmas story screams out one message – *you must decide*. You must decide – is that baby in Bethlehem God...or isn’t he? If he’s not God, you can ignore him. If he is God, then God is in charge of every aspect of your life. Herod understood – there is no middle ground.

You can’t embrace the attitude espoused by that cable TV guy. How can you *admire* someone’s morality and teaching if, at the core, he is a *liar*? Remember, Jesus’s claim was – “I am God.” If he is lying about that, then ignore him and denounce him as a dishonest man.

But if he is God...then you *should* be ‘greatly troubled,’ like Herod. Because if Jesus is God, then you must, in 2017, stop ignoring him, stop dismissing him, stop disobeying him, stop

treating him with yawning boredom. It's dangerous to treat God as if He is a nick-knack on your shelf.

Decide. Is this child *God*? If so, then your life changes. If he is God, then:

- + you *must* pray every day, as if your *life depends on it... because your life DOES depend on it!*
- + you must break the habits of sin which keep you from loving Christ and other people...Jesus said you can't serve two masters. *He meant it.*
- + your political views, your daily moral decisions about right and wrong must be based on what Jesus said....Jesus said he is 'the way the truth and the life.' *He meant it.*
- + your priorities must change. The Lord *must be first*. If loving your spouse, your children, your family, your neighbor is lower on your list than loving your own ego, your favorite team, and your bank account – all that has to change.
- + you must stop lying, stop pretending. Jesus said that deeds done in darkness must be brought into the light. He was not kidding.
- + you must love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, serve the poor, stand for justice...these are *commands* from Christ...not *suggestions*.
- + you must treasure the unborn, feed the hungry, reject what is violent...these are the *direct implications* of Christ's Gospel. There is no wiggle room.
- + you must gather with the Church, celebrate the sacraments, give of your financial resources, share your time and talent... I don't know how you can follow *Christ* without being a generous member of Christ's body, the church.

King Herod knows that the Christmas story is not just for *kids*. He knows that the baby of Bethlehem requires a life-changing decision by every *adult*. Jesus is not just a nice dead guy. If that's all he is, then he was a liar who unleashed a hoax. If he's not God – stop coming to church.

But if he is God – then take Jesus as seriously as Herod did. And know that the life-changing work that Jesus calls us to is not something we do alone. If you believe that he is God, then keep coming back, keep hearing his Good News, keep meeting other people who love this same Lord, keep praying and serving in the community of believers, and keep meeting Christ in the sacraments. You don't have to do it alone. In the Eucharist, He's right here on the altar.

Time to decide.

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