January 3, 2021

“Outsiders and Insiders: All Are Welcome”

Matthew 2:1-18

You could argue there are numerous postures and feelings people can have toward Christ: admiration, respect, indifference, faith, antagonism, gratitude, frustration, amazement. Matthew only gives us two options. You’re for Jesus or against Him; you either love Him or hate Him. Those who love Jesus demonstrate attentiveness and humility toward Him which lead to grateful and generous worship (which we see in the Magi). Those who hate Jesus are fueled by a self-centered fear which leads to self-preservation and a rejection of Christ (which we see in Herod).

Do you tend to be more like the Magi or Herod in your typical responses to King Jesus? Do you find yourself moving toward Him in generous worship or rejecting His Lordship and seeking to preserve your own autonomy? Let’s not assume this question is easy to answer. And let’s not assume we can answer it based on the superficial designations of being churched or unchurched; orthodox in our theology or out in left field in our beliefs.

The magi were star-gazing foreigners from the East. They didn't worship Yahweh and were looked down on by the Jews as pagan outsiders. King Herod, on the other hand, was a Jewish insider who had access to the scriptures and ways of God's people.

Being an insider doesn't necessarily mean you'll give yourself to Jesus in generous worship; nor does being an outsider exclude you from searching for and discovering the Savior. Outward appearances and assumptions are so often wrong.

Some of us assume knowing what the Bible says about Jesus and showing up in church on a regular basis mean we are somehow automatically close to Christ. Others assume not reading the Bible or putting in consistent pew time means someone can’t be close to Jesus. Matthew reminds us this isn't necessarily true. Do you feel like an insider when it comes to faith; someone who knows it all? Or do you feel a little out of place in the presence of Christ? Either way, you have a choice to move toward Jesus in generous worship . . . or not.

The Magi are definitely outsiders. They don't have all the scriptures at their disposal. And, yet, not being a part of the in-crowd doesn't keep them from discovering a sign in the natural world that points them toward the King of the Jews. The star doesn't lead them to the Savior directly, but it leads them to the scriptures which speak more clearly about Messiah's birth.

The star also leads them to someone on the inside; King Herod.

What a blow to Herod’s ego when outsiders from the east come and ask him if he knows where they can find the newly born King of the Jews! Seething just below the surface, he fakes a welcoming smile and inquisitive spirit – as if he, like them, is interested in actually worshipping King Jesus. Even though he was an insider with full access to the stories of Yahweh and God’s power to deliver and redeem, Herod didn't want to share power with anybody. Instead of being hospitable and introducing the foreigners to the God who wants to “bless all the peoples of the earth” (Genesis 12:3), Herod is fearful and self-centered. He’s merely using the magi as pawns in his scheme to maintain control and political clout.

It gets ugly when Herod finds out the wisemen don't keep up their end of the bargain. And because of the actions of this insider, innocent children are slaughtered, the tragic words of another prophet named Jeremiah come true, and mothers and fathers will spend the rest of their lives mourning the tragic deaths of their infant sons.

Who do you identify with? An insider who feels threatened by a loss of power? Or an outsider curious about a coming King? But maybe that’s a false dichotomy. Maybe we can identify with both the insider and outsiders. We have moments of genuine curiosity in which we move toward Christ in grateful and generous worship. But we also find ourselves rejecting His authority and rightful place on the throne so we can keep calling the shots. We are, at times, drawn to Him. At other times we seem to resent His call to repentance.

The good news of Christmas and the Gospel is that all are invited to worship Christ: the insider who wants to hold on to power and outsider who doesn’t know much but is willing to inquire and follow. But we still have a choice to move toward Him or fight against Him.

Many who are on the margins of society are drawn to Jesus, finding in Him someone who actually understands their predicament and the pain of being rejected and excluded. Others who define themselves as open-minded and accepting do not appreciate His declaration that there is a narrow way that leads to life. Some thrill to the story of His incarnation, His coming in the actual flesh and dignifying our very human lives. Others want nothing to do with His Lordship if He must be King over every part of our very human, flesh-and-bone life. And still, there is room at the manger for everyone. Outsiders and insiders have the same choice.

All the players in this story are invited to the birthday party of Jesus, but only the outsiders from the east end up attending and bringing presents. All of them hear the words of scripture revealed so they can locate the babe, but only the magi actually make it to Bethlehem. They all hear about a "child who has been born King of the Jews" – and claim they want to "pay Him homage" – but not all of them are truly interested in bending their knee in submission and placing a crown on His head. The sad thing is it's the insider, the one who should know better, the one who probably does many of the right things (religiously-speaking), who misses out on worshipping Jesus as the newborn King. In John's more esoteric telling of the Christmas story, he reminds us that "[Jesus] came to his own people, and even they rejected him." (John 1:11) And that should give us pause as we decide who we identify with more readily.

Again, the Good News is that Jesus came to draw all people to Himself – and to the Father: insiders and outsiders; those who are more readily submissive as well as those who are more often stubborn and independent; those who are drawn to power and those who want nothing to do with it; the rich and the poor; those who choose to look at this pandemic in very different ways through very particular lenses; those who think the outcome of the election was tragic and those who think it was glorious.

And the list goes on; anyone and everyone is invited to worship Jesus. It doesn’t matter your age, socio-economic status, educational background, particular faith background or the fact that you have no faith background at all.

Even Herod could have joined the magi in worshipping Jesus and bringing gifts to honor Him. Jesus came to save everyone: seekers from other faiths and maniacal leaders who are unhealthy and obsessed with control.

That’s the point of His coming and His living and His dying. He came to make a way for everyone and anyone to come and worship.

**Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion**

1. What are some of the other details you would love to know about the story of the Magi and King Herod?

2. In relationship to The Church (this church or any church you’ve been a part of), do you tend to feel more like an insider or outsider?

3. In what ways have you been a curious and inquisitive seeker? Even as someone who is “Rooted in Jesus,” how do you keep seeking and asking questions and looking for ways to get close to Jesus?

4. In what ways do you reject Jesus’ authority? How do you tend to hold on to power and control over your own life?

5. If you are an “insider in The Church,” are you tempted to hold on to power and control? How has or does that tend to play itself out?

6.What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love [Together], [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?