

## THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

Matthew 2:1-12

In my first appointment I received a plaque from one of my younger church members that said: “If the three wise men were women, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts and there would be peace on earth.”

Christin Ditchfield, a New Mexico talk-radio host who writes for Focus on the Family magazine and other publications says, “There were three wisewomen mentioned in the book of Luke, Chapters 1 & 2: Mary, the mother of Jesus, Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist and a devout prophetess, Anna. Just as the wise men followed the star, we can follow the shining examples of these women who lived lives “holy and pleasing to God.”

This account of the Magi in our text this morning from the Gospel of Matthew has become part of most church’s Christmas celebrations, in fact I seriously doubt there has ever been a church Christmas pageant that did not include the Three Wise Men. Most nativity scenes show the Magi crowded into the stable of Jesus’ birth – along with the shepherds, animals, an angel, Mary, Joseph and the baby – the Magi were almost certainly *later* visitors, coming perhaps as long as two years after Jesus’ birth. By then, Joseph had no doubt found better lodging for his family, which is probably why Matthew says the wise men entered “the house” to find Jesus. But whatever the time and place, these Gentile visitors from the East “knelt down and paid him homage.” In older vocabulary, they “adored” him. They finished what they came to do.

Who were these travelers from faraway Persia who studied star charts and discerned fates in the night sky? When you think of it...who could be less likely to have discovered the Christ child? These men were astrologers, soothsayers; not exactly what one would think God would use. Yet, the three Wise Men are the ones who came looking for the child and they come to worship the Messiah. In some ways this Biblical account is right up there with the angel’s visit to Mary, “How can this be when I have never been with a man?” Nothing about the birth and celebration of the life of this son of God and son of Man has been ordinary. Still, we know that Matthew is not endorsing astrology and trust me following your horoscope is the last thing disciples do! Rather, Matthew cleverly testifies to the power of God, to bring foreigners and people who have been clueless about the one true God. While so many Jews simply did not believe; from the beginning of the life of Christ, Gentiles were flocking to see this babe born in the manger – the Shepherds started the ball rolling and now these visitors from the Orient. To me these facts speak loud and clear about a God who is determined to be found and will use any and all measures even something like astrology to reach out to people who are open.

Christmas becomes for most of us a grand festival of gift giving and gift receiving. But the gifts from the Magi are hardly ones we would find among the pages of a Sears Catalog or in any of the aisles at Walmart! And except possibly the gold, these gifts are not the kind one would bring to a baby shower either! Much speculation has been made of the significance of the three gifts over the years. The gold is said to reflect Jesus’ royalty, frankincense his divinity, and myrrh his sorrowful death. Or perhaps the Wise Men brought these gifts because they wanted to bring what was most precious to them!

Two thousand years ago, gold, frankincense and myrrh were worth (in today's equivalents), six hundred, five hundred and four thousand dollars per pound, respectively. A similar gift today (frankincense and myrrh have declined in value, gold has increased) would set a 21st century king back six thousand dollars for the gold, but only fifteen dollars apiece for frankincense and myrrh.

The Magi celebrated the Christ child with the most valuable items in the ancient world. But these gifts were not just of monetary value. They were also gifts of health and long life. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were among the earliest and most prized curative medicines in the ancient world.

Frankincense and myrrh are both resins that come from wounds in the bark of trees that grow only in northeast Africa and southern Arabia. In the first century, the frankincense resin was considered divine and could only be gathered during harvest season. No wonder the whole civilized world at Jesus' time was begging for frankincense as both a fragrance and a medicine that cured everything from bad breath to skin infections. Modern researchers have discovered that frankincense has wonderful antiseptic, antifungal and anti-inflammatory properties that make it a useful dressing as well as being a bronchial dilator that helps in lung infections and asthma.

Myrrh is biochemically similar to frankincense, though its value in the ancient world was many times higher. A drop of myrrh could double the price of cheaper perfumes, and Egyptians used myrrh to embalm royal mummies. Myrrh was prescribed for a much wider range of ailments than frankincense. A cure in the ancient world for diaper rash, baldness, obesity, and used for anesthetic (Jesus was given, you'll remember, wine mixed with myrrh during his crucifixion), it was also seen as something that might prolong life. Experiments with myrrh today are aimed at accelerating metabolism, thereby lowering cholesterol and body weight.

Did you know that Gold, considered one of nature's most perfect substances, was always believed to harbor supernatural healing powers? Today, gold injections help people with rheumatoid arthritis as well as those who do not respond well to standard steroidal treatments. Gold inhibits enzymes that break down proteins in the body.

What equivalent to frankincense, gold and myrrh could we offer to others this Christmas to demonstrate the enriching, healing, transformative presence Christ's birth brings into the world? First, is the gift of redemption. The gift that no matter what has gone on in our life, no matter what choices we may have made, no matter that we look in the mirror and see only faults...through the gift of Christ's sacrifice, God only sees his precious children. All God's children – regardless of color, age, physical size shape or condition...all the goodness, all the excitement, all the joy is ours for the taking – simply by opening the gift of grace by accepting Christ into our life and committing our life to him.

The second gift is the forgiveness of our sins, so that no guilt, no past events, may stand between us and our full acceptance as adopted children of God. And God's forgiveness is never ending. Keep this in mind the next time you have a hard time extending forgiveness to someone...no matter what you do...God always forgives you...how can we do any less?

Ministering to the human spirit does not take anything out of you - it puts life and love back into you while multiplying itself through your actions. Think how the other person will feel when you wave them into that perfect parking place that opened up, even though you were there first. Isn't it possible that they might then smile and thank the check-out clerk, wishing her a nice afternoon - and mean it? Ever consider what it might mean to the volunteers and the patrons of a local soup kitchen if one week instead of contributing some canned goods or dried pasta, you brought by enough pots of flowers to put one on each table? The possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

Thirdly, God freely gives us "all wisdom and insight" through which we can finally get a picture of God's will. And this perhaps is one of the most confusing areas in a person's life. How can I know the will of God for my life? The message from the prophet Micah 6:8 immediately pops into my mind: *He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* Or, if you prefer the King James Version: *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?* What is the will of God for your life? Follow these words of Micah and you cannot go wrong.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a store clerk who fully embodied justice, mercy and humility. "A friend of mine, who is an associate pastor of a large Presbyterian church in California, once told me how she loved to go to Nordstrom Department Store in Bel Air during the Christmas season. She couldn't afford to buy much at that store, but she enjoyed going there at Christmastime just to take in the ambiance. The decorations were always magnificent and there was live music on several floors.

On one of her visits my friend was on the top floor of the store looking at some of the finest dresses in the world when the elevator doors opened and out stepped a bag lady. Her clothes were dirty, and her stockings were rolled down to her ankles. She just stood there holding a gym bag in her right hand. It was obvious that this woman was out of place and not about to buy anything. The dresses were in the thousand-dollar category, and this bag lady did not seem like the kind of person who would have that kind of money.

My friend expected a security guard to promptly arrive and usher the bag lady out of the store. But instead of security guards, a stately saleswoman came over to her and asked, "May I help you, madam?"

The bag lady said, "Yeah, I wanna buy a dress."

"What kind of dress?" the saleswoman asked in a polite and dignified manner.

"A party dress!" the bag lady answered.

"You've come to the right place," said the saleswoman. "Follow me. I think we have some of the finest party dresses in the world."

The saleswoman spent more than twenty minutes matching dresses with the woman's skin color and eye color, trying to help her ascertain which dress would go best with her complexion.

After selecting three dresses the saleswoman deemed to be the most appropriate for the bag lady, she bade the woman to follow her into the dressing room. My friend hurried into the adjoining dressing room and put her ear up to the wall. She wanted to hear all of this. It was remarkable.

The bag lady tried on the dresses with the saleswoman's help. But then after about ten minutes, the bag lady said sternly, "I've changed my mind. I am not going to buy a dress today!"

"That's okay," the saleswoman said gently. "But here is my card. Should you come back to Nordstrom department store, I do hope you will ask for me. I would consider it such a privilege on you again." This of course is a brilliant illustration of someone living out the words of Micah, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

*"Jesus invites us into the reign of God,"* says Episcopal priest Peter Wallace. This is the eternal kingdom "that encourages and provokes authenticity, that calls us to become fully human beings before the face of God." When we walk in the glory of the light of Christ, we discover that the goal of our lives is not to earn the most money, win the most awards, close the most deals or accumulate the most possessions. Instead, it is to be the authentic men and women that God created us to be. The goal of our lives is to be full human beings, standing in the presence of our loving Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.