

Leaving Our Gifts Behind
Matthew 2:1-12
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
December 24, 2006
Dr. Brent Beasley

“The Wise Man”

Beware of beautiful strangers, said one of the magi-astrologers, the wise men, and on Friday avoid travel by water. The sun is moving into the house of Venus, so affairs of the heart will prosper.

We said this to Herod, or something along those lines, and of course it meant next to nothing. To have told him anything of real value, we would have had to spend weeks of study, months, calculating the conjunction of the planets at the precise moment of his birth and at the births of his parents and their parents back to the fourth generation.

But Herod knew nothing of this, and he jumped at the nonsense we threw him like a hungry dog and thanked us for it. A lost man, you see, even though he was a king. Neither really a Jew nor really a Roman, he was at home nowhere. And he believed in nothing, neither Olympian Zeus nor the Holy One of Israel, who cannot be named. So he was ready to jump at anything, and he swallowed our little jingle whole. But it could hardly have been more obvious that jingles were the least of what he wanted from us.

“Go and find me the child,” the king told us, and as he spoke, his fingers trembled so that the emeralds rattled together like teeth. “Because I want to come and worship him,” he said,

and when he said that, his hands were still as death. Death. I ask you, does a man need the stars to tell him that no king has ever yet bowed down to another king?

He took us for children, that sly, lost old fox, and so it was like children that we answered him. “Yes, of course,” we said, and went our way. His hands fluttered to his throat like moths.

Why did we travel so far to be there when it happened? Why was it not enough just to know the secret without having to be there ourselves to behold it? To this, not even the stars had an answer. The stars said simply that he would be born. It was another voice altogether that said to go—a voice as deep within ourselves as the stars are deep within the sky.

But why did we go? I could not tell you now, and I could not have told you then, not even as we were in the very process of going. Not that we had no motive, but that we had so many. Curiosity, I suppose: to be wise is to be eternally curious, and we were very wise. We wanted to see for ourselves this One before whom even the stars are said to bow down—to see perhaps if it was really true because even the wise have their doubts.

And longing. Longing. Why will a man who is dying of thirst crawl miles across sands as hot as fire at simply the possibility of water? But if we longed to receive, we also longed to give. Why will a man labor and struggle all the days of his life so that in the end he has something to give the one he loves?

So we finally got to the place where the star pointed us. It was at night. Very cold. The Innkeeper showed us the way that we did not need to be shown. A harebrained, busy man. The odor

of the hay was sweet, and the cattle's breath came out in little puffs of mist. The man and the woman. Between them the king. We did not stay long. Only a few minutes as the clock goes, ten thousand, thousand years. We set our foolish gifts down on the straw and left.

I will tell you two terrible things. What we saw on the face of the newborn child was his death. A fool could have seen it as well. It sat on his head like a crown or a bat, this death that he would die.

And we saw, as sure as the earth beneath our feet, that to stay with him would be to share that death, and that is why we left—leaving only our gifts, withholding the rest.

And now, brothers, I will ask you a terrible question, and God knows I ask it also of myself. Is the truth beyond all truths, beyond the stars, just this: that to live without him is the real death, that to die with him is the only life?

[Frederick Buechner, Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons, p. 11-13]

We sometimes call them "kings" or "Wise Men." The word that appears in the original Greek is *magoi*. That is where we get the word "magi." The word literally means a magician or it can be used for an astrologer.

Some of the "magic" that they practiced was closer to what we call the natural sciences than it was to magic. They were well known for their observations of nature. And for the wisdom they gained from observing nature.

So these were probably indeed wise men, who had studied the writings of many religions and were aware of the world around them. It is no surprise, then, that they would notice that a new star had appeared in the sky and would understand its significance.

They were probably also men of power and wealth. They may not have actually ruled over kingdoms, but magi were often employed by Kings. One ancient writing says that a Persian could not become a king until he had mastered the sciences of the Magi. So they would have had positions in royal courts and were probably well paid for their services.

Where did they come from? All the Bible says is that they came from the East. Some people believe that Isaiah was foretelling the magi's arrival when he said, *the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring Gold and Frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

Whether they came from Midian and Ephah and Sheba or not is unclear. What is clear is that they had come from foreign lands in a day when long distance travel was not easy.

How many were there? The Bible never says there were three of them. It says there were three gifts. So we assume there were three men.

As Roger Paynter points out, the fact there were three gifts may prove there were more than three men. Surely somebody showed up and said, *I didn't know we were supposed to bring a present.*

In any case, they were wise and learned men who were from a distant land. They were not Jews. Yet they came a long distance to pay homage to the one who was born King of the Jews. They were the first gentiles to worship Christ.

[thanks for this description to Alex Stevenson, Grace United Methodist Church, Columbia, South Carolina]

They brought with them three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

When you think about it, these weren't very practical gifts for a baby, now were they? What do you think would have happened if the three wise men had actually been three wise women?

I've heard it said that if it had actually been three wise women, first off they would have asked for directions.

They would have arrived on time.

They would have helped deliver the baby.

They would have cleaned up the stable, probably made a casserole, and they would have brought practical gifts.

So instead of gold and frankincense, and myrrh, maybe something like diapers and formula and pacifiers. Things that a baby could actually use.

Gifts ought to be practical, you know. That's why I've Heidi and iron for Christmas this year.

Do you remember the Andy Griffith Show? Andy and Barney Fife? Well, they're sitting around the courthouse one day and Andy and Barney are talking about the gift that Barney bought his parents for their wedding anniversary.

And so Andy says, *What did you get them this year, Barn?*

Barney says, *Well, you know, they're very special parents, so I splurged and got them a septic tank.*

Wow, a septic tank. Well that was mighty kind of you, Barn.

And Barney says, *Yeah, I wanted to get them something they could use.*

The magi could have used some of Barney's practicality. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh would have been of no practical use whatsoever. So why did they bring that?

Maybe, if their gifts didn't serve a practical purpose, maybe they had some other meaning, some symbolic meaning, perhaps. Their gifts were not practical, but if you know what they symbolized, their gifts were very meaningful.

The familiar carol by John H. Hopkins that we sang earlier says it well in explaining the symbolic meaning of these three gifts. You might want to open your hymnal back up and look at that again.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown Him again. Gold is the symbol of wealth, and power, and excellence. We still give gold medals to those who achieve great things. Gold symbolizes wealth, power, and excellence, and the gift of gold refers to Jesus' kingship.

Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a Deity nigh. In the Bible, incense is a symbol of prayer and worship, for it was offered along with the sacrifices of the sanctuary. When the

Magi offered incense to the Christ child, they were acknowledging that they knelt in the presence of the holy. It was no mere earthly ruler who had come to birth in Bethlehem, but a heavenly one, the Son of God.

How the wise men understood this we don't know, but they did, and their gift shows it. And so they came, worshiping — bending the knee before the Christ.

[The description of the significance of the gifts comes from Dr. Richard C. Leonard, Laudemont Ministries, January 9, 2005]

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom. What kind of a gift is *this* for a newborn — myrrh, the spice used in preparing a body for burial? When the first two gifts were presented to the child Messiah maybe Mary and Joseph nodded in approval and understanding. But when the last gift was presented they probably looked puzzled.

Who would give embalming fluid to a baby? But the gift was prophetic just like the others. Jesus was the King of kings as the Gold suggested, and he was the great high priest and God incarnate as the Frankincense proclaimed.

But Jesus had also come to die—hence the myrrh. That's a crucial part of the story of this baby's life—his death.

When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the sixteenth century, he brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it.

The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when Ricci produced his paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown

up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin Mary and insisted on worshiping her rather than the crucified God.

When I look through our large stack of Christmas cards, and when I see the advertisements other trappings of the holiday season, I realize how we do much the same thing.

We tend to prefer vague, happy references to the “Christmas spirit” over any reminder of how the story that began at Bethlehem turned out at Calvary. On that hill. On that cross.

This baby Jesus who grew up to say: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Sorry to bring this up on Christmas Eve. I don't want to mess up your holiday. Truth in advertising, though, you know? If you want the baby, the cross comes with it.

I wonder what would happen if our church ran an advertising campaign and used Jesus' words here: *Come join up! The benefits are terrible: you get to put others first, endure suffering, and follow after a Savior who chooses to go into the deepest darkest corners of human existence—even death—before coming out fresh and new on the other side.*

It's kind of a hard sell, isn't it?—really the anti-ad-campaign because it's selling the hard truth: you won't live forever; you can't break out of your own small world until you submit your life to God; and there's no way around pain, loneliness, and

death—but there is a way through it when we follow the One who’s gone before us.

Do you really want to follow this baby? Phillips Brooks has that profoundly beautiful line in his hymn about the little town of Bethlehem: *The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*

Don’t we all struggle with hopes and fears, with some ambiguity, in our relationship to Jesus? We want to know him and to be guided by his truth and his way. But at the same time we fear his claims and know that if he comes, we will have to change and be judged by him and live life in a different way.

C. S. Lewis acknowledges this dilemma quite openly in his autobiography. On the one hand he traces how all through his life he thirsted after God. He wanted to know God, to learn the secret of life, to be one to one with the Ultimate.

And yet when God began to make himself clearer and clearer in Christ, Lewis found himself resisting. He wanted to be left alone, to remain free to do as he pleased, to live his life his own way. He knew in his heart that if God really came, he would come as Lord, and Lewis could not remain the same as he had been.

And so the dilemma mounted, and at one and the same time he wanted...yet he did not want.

At times on C. S. Lewis’s journey to faith he felt like saying: *Oh, I hope Christ is the truth about God; I am afraid he is not.* At other times he felt the opposite: *I am afraid Christ is the truth about God; I hope he is not.*

[from a sermon by John Claypool, Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, December 22, 1968]

Phillips Brooks was right: the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Bethlehem. We’re drawn to that baby, but deep in our hearts we know that if we go to him, it changes everything. Maybe we wish we could just give a Christmas present to the baby Jesus and go on our way, but we can’t. He is Lord.

I wonder, then, how do you react to the birth of the baby. In joy or in fear?

How do you react to this God who has really come in Bethlehem?

What will you give him?

And what will you hold back?

We set our foolish gifts down on the straw and left, the wise man said.

I will tell you two terrible things. What we saw on the face of the newborn child was his death. A fool could have seen it as well. It sat on his head like a crown or a bat, this death that he would die.

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