

“The Fourth Gift of the Wise Men”

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany of our Lord, January 4, 2015

Do you ever wonder who they are? I sometimes wonder who they are! And right now I am not talking about the Wise Men or the Magi as we also call them! I mean those 3, 4, or 5 **anonymous children living somewhere out there in these United States today**, all under the age of 18, who are destined to one day become the **President of the United States!** No human being, no matter how intelligent or educated, and no computer software, no matter how sophisticated—can discern for any of us ahead of time, who these children might be! God knows, of course, because **God knows everything!** But we do not know everything! We might think we know who is going to be elected **president** of the United States in **November 2016**, but our hunch is only a **stab in the dark** at best!

Yet isn't this what makes the birth of Jesus so absolutely intriguing! Isn't this what **makes the visit** of those Wise Men, who came some 400 miles westward from what would probably be known today as the countries of **Iraq** or **Iran** today so tremendously fascinating! These **Wise Men** already knew deep down **in their heart of hearts** what the true destiny of this Child would be! They knew that this Child, recently born in **Bethlehem was no mere, ordinary, human mortal like you and me! Instead the One who had been born was, already as an infant, the Lord of lords and the King of kings!**

I, for one, also find it most interesting that when the **Son of God**, as St. Paul tells us in **Philippians 2**, became a human being, he **did not enter this world as a fully grown human being**, the way that Adam made his grand entrance into our world at creation's dawn! No, St. Paul says: *“He emptied himself” (v.7)!* The NIV says, *“He made himself nothing!”*

This One who had always been the eternally-begotten Son of God, “THROUGH WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE AND WITHOUT WHOM NOTHING WAS EVER MADE THAT HAS BEEN MADE” (JOHN 1:3), chose to enter our world as a **completely vulnerable, mortal human baby**. The writer of **Hebrews** tells us that following our **Lord Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection that he ascended gloriously into heaven**, where he sits once again at the Father's right hand. **He has now become our great High Priest** who has gone through the heavens! And: **“WE DON'T HAVE A HIGH PRIEST WHO IS UNABLE TO SYMPATHIZE WITH US IN OUR WEAKNESSES, BUT ONE WHO IN EVERY RESPECT WAS TEMPTED AS WE ARE THOUGH HE NEVER SINNED!” (HEBREWS 4:14-15)**

When we remember that he **“emptied” himself completely**, taking on the form of a servant, we also must remember that he was **not only born into our world as a helpless baby**, he was born as a helpless, vulnerable baby into a **very financially-poor; “poverty-stricken”** family.

Brothers and sisters, I agree with a great preacher in America today by the name of **John Piper** who tells us that **Matthew wants us to glean 5 important truths** from this Gospel lesson today, and here they are:

- (1) Jesus is the Messiah, the King of the Jews, and should be honored as such.
- (2) Jesus is to be worshiped not just by Jews, but by the whole Gentile world as well!
- (3) God wields the universe to make his Son known and worshiped. Even if this meant placing a special star into the sky just to serve as a GPS (Global Positioning System) for

leading these Wise Men to Jerusalem. He could do it! Why? All that his Son be known by us and worshiped by us!

(4) Jesus is troubling to people who do not want to worship him, even as the news of his real presence in our world always incites opposition from those who do not believe this!

(5) **Worshiping Jesus means joyfully ascribing authority and dignity to Christ with sacrificial gifts of our own!**

We really do not know how these Wise Men from the west gained knowledge of a long-awaited Messiah that would be born unto the Hebrew people someday, but many scholars have made an educated guess that this was all the result of the **Prophet Daniel's having been exiled in Babylon**; and how rather than his **shrinking away from his faith**, he continued to make bold testimonies to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to all people who were there; **risking life and limb!** **Daniel** may have told them of the promise God made to the Patriarch **Abraham**: ***"THROUGH YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH ONE DAY BE BLESSED!"*** (***GENESIS 12:1-3***)

When the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem, they started asking a whole lot of questions of the people who were living there! **Among their questions was this one: "WHERE IS HE WHO HAS BEEN BORN TO BE KING OF THE JEWS? FOR WE HAVE SEEN HIS STAR IN THE EAST AND HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM!"** (***MATTHEW 2:2***)

Now when King Herod heard this, he became very worried. About twenty years earlier the Roman Senate had named him "King of the Jews." He was very jealous and would kill anyone who he thought wanted to be king. He even had two of his own sons killed when he thought they were **possibly going to kill him and become king in his place**, along with his very **favorite wife!** So he called a meeting of the Jewish priests and teachers and asked them where the Christ was supposed to be born. They told him, "In the town of Bethlehem in Judea. For the Prophet Micah wrote: ***'AND YOU, O BETHLEHEM EPHRATA, THOUGH YOU ARE SMALL AMONG THE CLANS OF JUDAH, FROM YOU SHALL COME FORTH ONE FOR ME WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL, WHOSE ORIGIN IS OF ANCIENT DAYS!'***" (***MICAH 5:2***).

Then Herod had a secret meeting with the Wise Men who had come from the east. He asked them the exact time they had first seen the star. We might imagine that they told him, "TWO YEARS AGO!" For when they were persuaded by God not to go back to Herod and report the newborn Savior's whereabouts, and to return home to their own country by another way, this is when Herod ordered the mass execution of Hebrew boy babies, two years and younger in his attempt to kill the Christ!

Upon leaving temple, the Wise Men started for Bethlehem and as they went, they again saw that same star which they had seen in the east. They were very happy to see the star so near to them again! When the Wise Men came to the house where the baby was, they saw him with his mother Mary. **They bowed down and worshiped him** and opened their gifts which they had brought him. They had three kinds of gifts: **gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**

GOLD—A GIFT FIT FOR A KING.

Gold was a gift usually presented only to a king. It was the most precious metal of that day and it symbolized royalty. The Wise Men recognized that this baby sleeping on a manger bed of hay—**was no ordinary baby—this was King Jesus!** He is King of kings and Lord of lords. The

Wise Men did not cuddle him. They did not play games with him. Instead they bowed the knee in reverence to him. They recognized that He indeed is a King!

FRANKINCENSE—HIS SINLESS DEITY.

If gold was a gift of wealth fit primarily for a king, then **frankincense was used to worship the King**. These Wise Men recognized the sinless deity of Jesus that was deserving of their worship. **Matthew 2:11** says, ***“AND WHEN THEY WERE COME INTO THE HOUSE, THEY SAW THE YOUNG CHILD WITH MARY HIS MOTHER AND FELL DOWN, AND WORSHIPPED HIM: AND WHEN THEY HAD OPENED THEIR TREASURES, THEY PRESENTED UNTO HIM GIFTS OF GOLD, FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH.”***

Perhaps there are always those many **nominal Christians who will tell you** that they believe in Jesus, but they are not really willing to **give him the worship due his name**. The Bible so clearly tells us that we are to ***“WORSHIP THE LORD THY GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY” (DEUTERONOMY 6:13)***. If Jesus is not the **LORD God**, then **this is the ultimate blasphemy! Only God himself should be the object of our worship.**

The Wise Men knew that this baby was God, and they fell down in worship of him. **Isaiah 9:6** states clearly: ***“FOR UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN, UNTO US A SON IS GIVEN AND THE GOVERNMENT SHALL BE UPON HIS SHOULDER. AND HIS NAME SHALL BE CALLED: WONDERFUL, COUNSELLOR, the Mighty God, THE EVERLASTING FATHER; THE PRINCE OF PEACE.”***

You see, Jesus was not only born a king. He was God in human flesh. Now, whether the Wise Men fully understood all of this or not, I don't know, but I do know that the Holy Spirit impelled them to make these gifts and the Holy Spirit recorded the actual presentation of these gifts to him in St. Matthew's Gospel.

There will be many who read this and say, ***“Well, I don't believe that Jesus Christ is God, but I do believe that He was a good man!”***

But what did Jesus say on that day when the rich, young ruler, came running eagerly up to Jesus and bowed down on his knees in a spirit of deep humility before Jesus feet and addressed him saying: ***“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:16)*** Jesus responded to that young, eager, respectful young man like this: ***“Why do you call me good; for no one is good except God alone!” (Mark 10:18)*** If Jesus Christ is not God, then there is no way he can be a good Teacher by the very confession of his own faith here. And if Jesus Christ is a man and only a man, He is a fake, a fraud, and an imposter for He Himself claimed to be God on that day when he said, ***“BEFORE ABRAHAM WAS, I AM!” (JOHN 8:58)***. ***“I AM”*** is the most sacred name for God and Jesus claimed it for himself!”

THE MYRRH—HIS SACRIFICIAL DEATH.

The third gift the Wise Men brought was a valuable gum-like substance called myrrh that was used to embalm the dead. Stop and think of the significance of this—bringing a child something that would be **used to embalm the dead?** They did this because the **recognized that this little One was born to die.**

Myrrh was also used as a narcotic to dull pain. **Mark 15:22-23** tells us: **“AND THEY BROUGHT HIM UNTO THE PLACE CALLED GOLGOTHA, WHICH IS, BEING INTERPRETED, “PLACE OF THE SKULL.” AND THEY GAVE HIM TO DRINK WINE MINGLED WITH MYRRH, BUT HE RECEIVED IT NOT!”**

There upon that cross, instead of tasting myrrh to numb his pain, Jesus tasted death for every man. And finally, to prepare him for burial, we also read in **John 19:38-40** that Nicodemus bought some myrrh.

Just like the Prophet Isaiah with respect to his prophecies, we don't know how much of what the Wise Men were saying and doing, that they really understood themselves, but we know that the Holy Spirit who moved them and led them to do these very things understood why everything was happening the way it was and did happen! And this is not by accident. Of everything that could be listed as gifts to the King, we read they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh—to recognize the Baby Jesus as the King of kings and the LORD of lords, and to recognize him also as God and to show us already during his days of infancy that he was the appointed Lamb of God whom the Father sent into this world from heaven to atone for all of our sins! (John 1:29)

So brothers and sisters, what do you think is the greatest thing that Wise Men did in their devotion to the Christ Child?

(1) Was it their diligent study of the heavens, which resulted in the discovery of the Christmas Star? The Wise Men, also known as the Magi, were probably not kings, but a priestly band of Zoroastrian scholars and stargazers. We don't know what brilliant star these Magi saw. **In 7 BC there was an unusual conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter,** which could have appeared as a New Heavenly Light, and four years later, **Halley's Comet** flared through the skies. Could the star have been a **SUPERNOVA** which exploded centuries before and whose light had just arrived in our celestial neighborhood? **Or was it a supernatural star directly placed there by God himself? Nevertheless it was not their astronomical skill that etched the Wise Men into the annals of history!**

(2) Was their single greatest act in their willingness to travel so far from home? The Wise Men loaded up the camels and struck out, uncertain of where the star would lead them. Despite their faith and sacrifice, this still wasn't their greatest act.

(3) Was it in the great courage they expressed in confronting King Herod with the question, “Where is he born who is the King of the Jews?” Herod was a crazed man for sure; a Jewish puppet of the Roman Government, insanely jealous, constantly plotting. In the course of his reign, he murdered his wife and mother-in-law, and then assassinated three of his sons. The Roman emperor once remarked that it was **safer to be Herod's pig than one of his relatives!** The Wise Men took a big chance, insinuating that Herod had a claimant to his throne! **No it was not in any of these things just mentioned that constituted the Wise Men's greatest act of devotion to our Newborn King!**

(4) Their greatest act is to be found in their willingness to bow down and worship our Lord! Imagine! The most intellectual men of their day, scientists and scholars, wise by worldly standards, going on their knees before a newborn baby boy! And they offered him gifts—not some of those last minute gifts they could have picked up very cheaply at the Dollar

Store, but these **were choice items from the gleaming shelves of Dillard's or Nieman-Marcus!**

The Wise Men's greatest act was worship—and it is still the highest form of human expression. Worship is devotion to **SOMETHING** or to **SOMEONE BIGGER THAN YOU ARE; SOMETHING THAT IS ETERNAL, POWERFUL AND TRUSTWORTHY!** The French author, **Antoine de Saint-Exupery**, wrote, *“Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction!”*

The Wise Men looked outward in the same direction and discovered God's sign of a newborn Messiah. They traveled together, hoped together and asked the same question(s) together! **“Where is he born the King?” Wise Men and Wise Women still seek him!**

The Wise Men did not waver. They did not falter! They did not give up their search until they found the Christ Child and his Mother. And when they did, **they fell down in worship!**

Would you be wise? Would you be honored? Would you be at least as great as the Wise Men? Then worship the King! Bow before him! Bring him gifts! Draw strength from your fellow worshipers, who are on the same journey of faith! Relinquish your worldly wisdom, your skills, your strength, your goods...**and yield them all to Him whose birth was trumpeted by angels, marked by a star and visited by lowly shepherds and Wise Men alike! Amen**