

Wise Men's Journey to Christmas

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12-31-23

Good morning, Colonial, and Happy New Year's Eve! My name is Mark Potter, and I'm privileged to serve as the campus pastor here at our Overland Park Campus. I also want to give a shout-out to my friends over at the SKC campus as well as all those joining us online today.

Did everyone have a good Christmas... other than the Chiefs game? Here's our family Christmas pic from last Sunday. By the way, before I forget, I want to give a shoutout to Katie Holland, Carrie Leary, Chelsea Torres, and all the volunteers who made this place look amazing for Christmas. They decorated it to look super nice, and then last Sunday, 1500 of you all came in and completely trashed it. Merry Christmas to our cleaning crew.

It's been a busy week for the Potters. In the past week my family celebrated two Christmases, two birthdays, an anniversary, and my oldest son got a tonsillectomy. He would appreciate your prayers... and some Jello.

If you're visiting with us, we have been preaching through an Advent sermon series titled, "The Journey to Christmas" and today is the last day of the series. We began with Mary's Journey, followed by Joseph's, and the shepherds', and today I have the assignment of preaching about the wise men's journey. Last Sunday on Christmas Eve, Pastor Jim took the liberty of dressing in camo because the shepherds were outdoorsmen. Historically, the wise men are often associated with astrologers or kings, so I was contemplating dressing up like one of those today, but instead I decided to be a wise guy.

When it comes to the wise men in the Bible, we actually don't have much information about them. Some of our perception of them comes from oral tradition or extra-biblical sources. The only gospel account that mentions the story of the wise men is found in Matthew 2.

I invite you now to stand if you are able and read Matthew 2:1-12 with me:

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose

went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Thank you. Please be seated and let's pray. (Pray)

My sermon today falls under three subheadings:

- I. The Magi's Journey
- II. A Troubled King
- III. Gifts of Worship

Let's begin with:

- I. The Magi's Journey

When the wise men entered the picture in Matthew's gospel account, Jesus had already been born. Christmas Day had already happened, and some time would've elapsed between the time of the shepherds visiting and the time when the wise men came. Now, in the traditional manger scene, we envision it all happening simultaneously, or at least within the same 24 hours of Jesus being born. But this was not the case. It could have been weeks or even months before the wise men arrived to give their gifts to baby Jesus. How do we know? Well, for two reasons:

1. According to verse 11, Mary and Joseph are no longer at the inn. They are now staying in a home.
2. It would've taken the wise men quite a long time to travel west to Jerusalem, meet with King Herod, and then complete the journey south to Bethlehem.

So who were these wise men and where did they come from?

The wise men came from a distant land east of Jerusalem. We don't really know exactly how far east because the text doesn't specify, but they were likely Persian priests who traveled more than 500 miles to Israel from modern day Iran or Iraq. As probable descendants of Noah's son Shem, they likely had some knowledge of Judaism, but being from a distant land out east they were considered Gentiles and would've worshipped other gods.

Modern church tradition has assigned three wise men to the Christmas story, but the Biblical text doesn't specify how many wise men were actually present. Early church tradition suggested that there were twelve wise men, but during the medieval period it was reduced to three based on the three gifts, and they were given names – Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. But again, these names are not found anywhere in the Bible. We are mostly speculating as to how many were there, where they came from, and what their names were.

So, what did the wise men do for a living? What was their occupation?

From my subtitle, “The Magi’s Journey,” you can tell that I prefer referring to them as magi instead of as wise men or kings because I believe the term ‘magi’ a bit more accurate and descriptive.

Magi is the root word of magic, magician, and magistrate. And although these magi weren’t exactly pull-a-rabbit-out-of-a-hat kind of magicians, they were thought to have the ability to interpret dreams, read the stars, and serve as a mediator between the celestial gods and the commoners in a similar way that the Levitical priests mediated for the nation of Israel. From this perspective, magi were basically priestly astrologers. They were wealthy and noble, but they weren’t true kings in that they didn’t have a kingdom or rule over anyone. In fact, they were closer to religious soothsayers or fortune-tellers than they were to actual kings.

I just ruined the song, “We three kings of Orient Are” for you, didn’t I? They weren’t really kings, there might not have been just three, and they weren’t from the orient. Some of you are like, “my whole childhood is a big fat lie!” I guess the title “We Priestly Astrologers from the Middle East Are” just doesn’t have the same ring to it. Are there any other Christmas songs I can ruin for you this morning? “Grandma Got Runover by a Reindeer?” News flash: it wasn’t really grandma! I digress.

A magi may seem like a strange profession in our culture, but it was common back then. And we all can relate in that we are all at least somewhat familiar with the sciences of astrology and astronomy. Our family took a trip to Florida a few weeks ago and we got a chance to visit the Kennedy space museum. (Show Kennedy space center family pic). That place is impressive!

We know more now than we ever have about space and the stars thanks to high-tech telescopes, satellites, and rockets. But there is so much more left to learn! It’s hard to go to a place like that and not be in awe of God’s creation. Learning about the stars and the universe is a spiritual experience for many people even today, and back in ancient times it was as well even though they didn’t have the technology we have. Back then, stars were considered divine beings. In addition, people’s fascination with stars and with the universe was directly related to spiritual prophecy and dream interpretation. Wise men, sorcerers, astrologers, and magicians were common in the ancient world, as evidenced in the Old Testament.

Take the book of Daniel, for example. Remember when King Nebuchadnezzar needed someone to interpret his dreams? Who did he summon? The wise men, astrologers, magicians, and sorcerers. But none of them could tell him what his dream meant, so he became very angry and ordered to have a bunch of them killed. As a result, they reached out to Daniel. When the king asked Daniel to interpret his dream, here’s how Daniel responded:

²⁷ Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, “The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. ²⁸ But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.

-Daniel 2:27-28

Now we don't have time to go into the full story of Daniel, but the point is that kings often sought out the counsel of wise men, astrologers, and magicians when they were paranoid or troubled about something. It was the magi's job to read the stars and interpret spiritual matters for troubled kings.

Fast forwarding to the New Testament, can you see the irony of the magi in the Christmas story? God used a star to lead these Gentile star-gazers directly to Jesus. He revealed the secret birth of His Son to soothsaying seekers. He used pagan astrologers to inform a Jewish king about The Jewish King. More on this later.

But not everyone was equally excited to hear the magi's news. This leads me to my second subheading:

II. A Troubled King

Picking up in verse three of our story, the Scripture says, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born."

The text says that King Herod was clearly troubled by the news of Jesus being born so he asked the magi to tell him. Some translations say *troubled*, while others say that he was *disturbed*. Make no mistake: Herod was paranoid and angry about the news.

Now it would be easy to dismiss this angry paranoia as Herod just being Herod. After all, Herod was a tortured soul. If you think you've got anger issues, Herod should make you feel better. Yours are nothing compared to King Herod. Herod was the type of man that if he felt his office was threatened, he would just start killing people. This was a man guilty of killing one of his wives, his mother-in-law, and three of his sons. It's no surprise that at the announcement of Jesus' birth, Herod sought to have Jesus killed, and when he couldn't find him, he ordered the killing of all the first-born sons ages two and under in the region of Bethlehem.

There is no doubt that Herod had a deadly temper. In fact, Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus once said of Herod that, "I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son."

But it wasn't just Herod who was troubled by the arrival of Jesus. Matthew's gospel says it was Herod along with "all of Jerusalem."

Why? Why were they so troubled at the news of a Jewish messiah being born? Shouldn't they have expected it, even celebrated it? After all, being Jewish, they must have anticipated the birth of their long-awaited Messiah. Most of them had grown up in the synagogue. They knew the Scripture. They may have been a bit surprised by the news, but they couldn't have been shocked because they had heard that one day a Savior would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David.

So why were Herod -- and the rest of Jerusalem -- so troubled by this news?

They were troubled by this news because, like many of us, they had grown all-too-comfortable with the status quo. They were resistant to any potential socio-political or religious upheaval because they were the powerbrokers... and they liked it. Being in Jerusalem, they controlled the religious and socio-economic livelihood of those within the Temple and throughout the whole nation of Israel.

Herod felt threatened because Jesus's birth meant a possible end to his political power, personal preferences, and imperial pleasures. Now it's easy to speak poorly of Herod and his cronies, but let's be honest. Jesus is a threat to our politics, preferences, and pleasures as well. Why? Because for Christians, there is only one King. And I have news for you, church! It ain't me. And it's not you. And it's not Herod, or Julius Caesar, or Napoleon, or Genghis Khan. It's not Stalin, or Hitler, or Churchill, or Washington, or Lincoln, or Trump, or Biden.

For Christians, there is only one King, and He was born in the city of David some 2,000 years ago. His name is Jesus Christ. And as followers of Jesus, we must surrender our politics, pleasures, and preferences over to Him, for there is no other King.

Here is the interesting thing about the gospel: The birth of Jesus is only good news for those who receive it as good news. Listen, like it or not, the gospel is divisive. To the magi, it was good news. Jesus was who they were searching for. But to Herod and many of the Jewish leaders, Jesus' birth was no gospel at all. Jesus' birth was bad news.

You see, Herod's perspective was that Jesus was about to ruin his life. And he was right. Jesus ruins people's lives. Welcome to Colonial, a place where a bunch of lives have been ruined by Jesus! Please don't get up and walk out. Let me explain.

Jesus ruins our lives in that He requires our full obedience, devotion, and worship. His Lordship demands something of us. And that something is surrendering our lives. Listen, if you're content with your comfortable life of maintaining power, pride, and control, Jesus is not for you. If you want to keep feeding your desire for materialism, lust, unforgiveness, and bitterness, Jesus being born is not your favorite thing. If your god is your work, or your spouse, or your kids, or a particular football team... Jesus's birth might trouble you, too.

On the other hand, it might lead you to do what the wise men did, which brings me to my third and final subheading:

III. Gifts of Worship

After Herod heard rumor of the magi's entrance into Jerusalem, he summoned them along with the chief priests and scribes to find out where this so-called Messiah could be found. In response to Herod's question, the Jewish leaders paraphrased an Old Testament prophecy from Micah 5:2, which states that Israel's messiah would come from Bethlehem.

And so, Herod told the magi to go find the child and report back after they found him. Then they set off on a short five-mile journey down to Bethlehem, led by the star that God had placed there to guide them.

The Scripture says that “¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”

Now I’d like to discuss the significance of these three gifts for a moment.

1. The first gift that the magi brought Jesus was the gift of gold.

Gold was considered the most precious metal. There are a ton of verses that reference the use of gold. Of course, idols were often created out of gold, such as the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the golden statue in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. Gold was an important element in the construction of the Tabernacle as well as the Temple.

According to Scripture, in the Tabernacle behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which contained the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. And inside the ark held the gold jar of manna. (Heb 10:3-4).

In addition, the book of Revelation points to the New Jerusalem which John describes as a city of pure gold.

John writes this in Revelation 21:15-17:

¹⁵ The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. ¹⁶ The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. ¹⁷ The angel measured the wall using human measurement, and it was 144 cubits thick. ¹⁸ The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass.

From these passages, gold represented wealth, prosperity, power, purity, and divinity. By bringing Jesus the gift of gold, the magi were acknowledging His Kingship. Gold was truly a kingly gift.

2. The second gift the magi brought Jesus was frankincense.

Frankincense is a sweet, expensive fragrance extracted from the gum resin of *Boswellia* trees that are native to parts of Africa and Asia. Frankincense was one of the pleasing fragrances in the incense burned by the priests in the Temple. According to Scripture, incense was “holy to the Lord” (Ex 30:37) and it burned as a regular sacrifice at daybreak and again at twilight on a three-foot-long, gold-plated altar standing before the Most Holy Place (Ex 30:7-8).

If gold was the gift for a king, then frankincense was the gift for a priest, for it was associated with sacrificial offerings, specifically the grain offering.

Leviticus 2:1-2 says:

“When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it ² and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

Now how does frankincense point to Jesus? It points to the fact that Jesus is our High Priest. In the Old Testament, the primary job of the priest was to make sacrificial offerings of atonement for the sins of God's people. In this way, he was the mediator between a sinful people and a holy God.

Church, I have good news! You don't need to burn incense or sacrifice animals to enter God's presence. We have free access to God through Jesus. He is our Mediator. He is the sacrificial Lamb and the High Priest. And because of Jesus assuming this role for us, the Scripture says that we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved (2 Cor 2:15).

The magi brought gifts of gold, and frankincense. And finally...

3. The third gift they brought Jesus was the gift of myrrh.

Now myrrh is actually somewhat similar to frankincense in that it's expensive, it's extracted from trees, and it has a strong aroma to it. And it, too, could be burned as incense.

In addition, myrrh was often used in beauty treatments and was sometimes mixed with wine to drink as a liquid pain reliever. Myrrh has natural healing properties.

But myrrh was most often used as an anointing oil. Speaking of anointing, Jesus was often referred to as the Anointed One.

In Luke 4:18, Jesus says,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has *anointed* me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

As an anointing oil, myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the deceased. In fact, immediately following Jesus' death, a man named Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to Jesus' tomb, wrapping Him in linen cloths and anointing Him with oils and spices. (John 19:39-40).

There is no doubt that gold, frankincense, and myrrh were extremely costly gifts that were fitting for the anointed Savior, Priest, and King of the world. The magi gave the best of what they had to honor and worship Christ.

Now at this point some of you may be wondering, “When is the sermon going to be over?” But others of you are wondering, “How does this story relate to me?”

First, we can learn something here about the way God protects and provides for Mary and Joseph. Keep in mind that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were about to be exiled to Egypt for an extended period of time in a sort of reversal of the Exodus story. In Exodus, God saved the Israelites from death by delivering them *from* Egypt. While in the Christmas story, God saved Jesus’ family from death by delivering them *to* Egypt.

In fleeing from Herod, however, they would’ve encountered significant unforeseen expenses. Where would they stay? How long would they be gone? How would they care for their newborn baby? How would they make ends meet? After all, Joseph was a working-class carpenter. They couldn’t just up and move. They had to rely on God to provide for them.

Receiving these lavish gifts from the wise men would’ve allowed Mary and Joseph to cover all their expenses for multiple years. I’m sure it wasn’t their first choice to flee to Egypt, but the Lord provided for them and protected them along the way.

Has God ever provided for you, or protected you, during a time of great uncertainty? Maybe you’re in that season now. My family has been hit with so many medical things over the past four years that we’ve lost count. But I can assure you that God has continued to provide for us and protect us every step of the way. And I know that our family is not alone. How many of you have a testimony of a time when God protected you and provided for you? Many of us can certainly relate to Mary and Joseph in that regard.

Secondly, we can relate to the magi in the story. Not because we all have a ton of money or study the stars. But because we, too, were once pagan Truth-seekers. What’s remarkable and even scandalous about the story of the magi is that God would lead these pagan astrologers to be among the first to worship His only begotten Son.

See, our temptation is to say, “God won’t reveal Himself to ‘those’ people because they don’t fit the mold. They’re not monotheistic Jews. Or, in our context, they’re not Reformed Presbyterians. Their theology is off. They don’t know anything about the Westminster Confession of Faith... they’re just a bunch of idol worshipers from the wrong side of town.”

Listen, if God is big enough to draw pagan soothsayers from the east to bow down at the foot of the manger, He is big enough to draw anyone there. If God is big enough to convince pagan sorcerers to travel hundreds of miles to shower a baby whom they’ve never met with tens of thousands of dollars-worth of gifts because they are one hundred percent convinced that this baby is the Messiah whom they are seeking, then God is big enough to convince you as well.

And that my friends is the beauty of God’s grace. Listen, you don’t have to have perfect theology to come to Jesus. You don’t have to be of a certain political party, or talk a certain way, or dress a certain way, or have a certain skin color, or be a certain age, or come from a certain part of the world, or have certain amount of friends and followers on social media. As a matter of fact, you

can be a non-Christian idol-worshiper from the east, but if God chooses to reveal Himself to you, you will bow down before him in worship. And to be honest, there is nothing you can do to stop it.

You say, but Pastor Mark, you must be talking about someone else instead of me. Because I can't come to Jesus. I'm not worthy enough, or good enough, or holy enough to come to Jesus. I don't fit the religious mold. I have too much sin in my life. To which I would say, "You're absolutely right. You're not worthy enough, or good enough, or holy enough, to come to the God. Listen, I'm not either. But Christ is worthy enough. As a matter of fact, He is the only one worthy enough."

You see, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is this:

The blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed us from all sin. Not a fraction of our sin, not some of our sin, not the majority of our sin. All of our sin. For if we say we have no sin, we have deceived ourselves, and the truth is not in us. BUT if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:7-9).

Furthermore, God promises eternal life for all those who believe. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 6:23).

You see, there is nothing you can do to inherit eternal life apart from the work that Christ has already done for us on the cross. And there is nothing you can do to overcome the grave apart from what Christ has already done through His resurrection.

Do you believe this? (I just heard a few of my South KC friends just shout "yes!" through the screen.)

God has given you the gift of His Son. And what He longs for in return is for you to fall before Him in worship, offering Him the gift of yourself.

Let's pray.