

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 72:10-14
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 2:1-12
January 10, 2021

“Bearing Gifts”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Magi were not kings. “We Three Kings” is a beautiful Christmas carol, but it’s not accurate. The imagery of kings comes from our Old Testament reading today, Psalm 72. “Wise Men” is another translation that doesn’t really tell us anything. Being a “wise man” was not a job description. The Magi were a professional class. Of course, some Magi were quacks. There are always opportunists and conmen in every profession. Today, however, we might call Magi scientists. Magi were astrologers, and astrology was considered a hard science. But they were also skilled in philosophy, medicine, alchemy and natural science. Think of it this way: It’s like God sent astronomer Neil deGrasse Tyson, molecular biologist specializing in aging, Cynthia Kenyon, and Timothy Berners-Lee who invented the internet. Throw in Dr. Fauci for good measure and add a political science expert and an inventor and you’ve got the idea. These were widely traveled respected men who were consulted by the powerful. A group of traveling Magi would not have been uncommon because that is how they made their living, traveling from one local ruler to another offering professional advice.

As astrologers Magi paid careful attention to the skies. This particular group saw an unusual star rising in their own land. Rare celestial events were *always* considered to have import. A new star meant that a new and exceptionally great king had been born. Modern astronomers do know that there were several unusual celestial events around the time of the birth of Jesus. Haley’s comet passed over in 11 BCE. About 7 BCE there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. Between 5 BCE and 2 BCE the star Sirius rose brilliantly, and from a visual perspective, straight up. Any one of these events could have been the star they followed. All we can really say taking into account both celestial events and census years is that Jesus was born sometime between 11 BCE and 4 BCE. What we can guarantee is that the Church got it wrong and he was NOT born in the year 1 CE, because there wasn’t a census or an astronomical event at that time, and King Herod was dead by then. My personal vote is that Christ was born 4 years before Christ!

We don’t know how many Magi there were in this group. Nowhere is it said that there were only three of them. The reason it is traditional to have three Magi in pageants is that there were three gifts. According to an eastern tradition there were twelve. Considering the fact that they often carried valuable equipment, gold and rare substances it would have been far more

likely that they traveled in a large group accompanied by servants and bodyguards. Such a group would have made quite an impression on the locals.

The Magi arrived in Jerusalem and began making enquiries. That was logical. When looking for the birth of a king head to the biggest city. It wasn't long before Herod heard of them and made enquiries of his own. The combination of Messianic expectation in the air and the mention of a future king was enough to guarantee his full attention. We are told that, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and the whole of Jerusalem with him."

Herod was called "Herod the Great." He reigned from 37 BCE to 4 BCE. His "greatness" much depended upon your perspective. He was a strong ruler and a great builder. He built the Temple. He brought stability to Israel. He found political favor with Rome. But Herod was ruthless and as he aged, increasingly paranoid. He murdered his wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra. He had his eldest son Antipater assassinated, along with two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. The Roman emperor Augustus said that it "*was safer to be Herod's pig than it was to be Herod's son.*" The words for pig and son are very close in sound so it was a play on words. His three surviving sons who did finally come to power when he died did so because their mothers were smart enough to send them to live in Rome. Jerusalem knew Herod, and they had every right to be anxious.

Herod consulted the experts, and the experts determined that according to all the prophecies, the Messiah was to be born in the tiny village of Bethlehem. Determined to thwart God Herod gave that piece of information to the Magi, and then told them to report back so that "he too could go and worship." (I'm not sure how stupid you'd have to be to believe that, but we're not told what the Magi thought.)

Bethlehem was a tiny town with a big history. Jacob buried Rachel in Bethlehem. Ruth lived in Bethlehem when she met and married Boaz. And Bethlehem was the city of David, David's home. Great things were expected of tiny Bethlehem. It was only six miles south of Jerusalem so the Magi didn't have far to go. They traveled to Bethlehem, and there in a most unexpected place, they found the new king. They offered their homage and gave three gifts, gold, a gift for a king, frankincense a gift for a priest, and myrrh, a valuable ointment used for both healing and burial.

The Magi were outsiders. They were Gentiles and strangers. They knew nothing of the prophecies. They followed the star to worship a new king, a king who would be king of kings. Their presence brought outside confirmation. God made sure that not only Israel knew God's Son had come into the world, but the Gentile world would receive the news as well. But the three gifts given to Jesus by the Magi had both a prophetic meaning and a practical purpose. Gold has always been recognized as one of the most valuable metals, but as dangerous as mining gold is today, it was far more treacherous then. Only the wealthiest people would possess gold. It was a gift given to kings and princes. A peasant family would never own anything gold. But gold was always welcome as currency, and because it was universally recognized, having gold would enable the family to travel anywhere, including Egypt.

Frankincense is an aromatic gum resin that gives a sweet scent when burned or warmed. It was used in the Old Testament to anoint priests, and as incense, symbolizing prayer. Myrrh comes from another tree, and is also produced from the sap. Myrrh has natural healing properties, but it tastes bitter. The name is derived from the word “bitter” in Hebrew. It is one of the ingredients used in the Old Testament for anointing. Myrrh also had excellent preservative properties, and was therefore often used to anoint the dead. Myrrh would symbolize both spiritual anointing, and suffering and death.

Receiving these gifts from Magi must have been an overwhelming and intimidating experience for Mary and Joseph. Even knowing what they did, it would have been hard to comprehend that these mysterious strangers, so far above their own station in life, would have sought out their child for this honor. In the giving and the receiving of these gifts God both met their practical needs, and prophetically declared the future ministry of Jesus.

Mary and Joseph received gifts on behalf of Jesus that they did not fully understand. When we accept Jesus as the son of God we are also accepting a gift we do not fully understand. Inviting Jesus into our lives brings about change. When we invite Jesus in, we invite the Holy Spirit in, and it is the Spirit who enables us to be in communion with Jesus and God the Father. When we worship the Christ child, we accept the adult Jesus of Nazareth, and all he came to bring to us—new life, and a citizenship that is in heaven.

Our nation is in an uproar right now following the events of this week. As Americans we are alarmed, but it is our citizenship in the kingdom of God through Christ that can help guide us. God was infinitely practical in sending the Magi. God sent scientists. In the midst of a pandemic, God has also sent us scientists. God provided for the practical needs of this young family though gold. God knows our practical needs as well. God steered the Magi away from an erratic leader and sent them safely on their way. Our current erratic leader will be out of office soon, and it should be said that even at his worst, Donald Trump doesn’t come remotely near the level of Herod. We will get through this. Life has, in fact, always been dangerous. There have always been political and social storms, but Jesus entered the world to bring us calm in the middle of the storm. Jesus is God’s greatest gift to us. Amen.

Psalm 72:10-14

- 10 May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
bring tribute to him.
May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.
- 11 May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.
- 12 For he will deliver the needy who cry out,
the afflicted who have no one to help.
- 13 He will take pity on the weak and the needy
and save the needy from death.
- 14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
for precious is their blood in his sight.

Matthew 2:1-12

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.