

Gifts of the King

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — Epiphany I, January 9, 2005

Isaiah 60:1-7 NIV

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the arm.
Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.
All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;
they will be accepted as offerings on my altar,
and I will adorn my glorious temple.

Matthew 2:1-12 NIV

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

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: " '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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

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

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east[e] went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:10-11: "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 and of incense and of myrrh."

Today is the first Sunday of the season called Epiphany. The word *epiphany* means "revelation" or "manifestation," and it refers to the revealing of the Messiah to the Gentile world. The birth of Christ took place in a Jewish environment — in Bethlehem, the city of David. The Messiah was the hope of all Israel,

the “anointed one” or Christ who would lead the Lord’s people back to their calling as witnesses to the kingdom of God. But the Messiah would be more than the Savior of Israel. He was to be the Savior of all peoples, “the light of the world.”

The visit of the Magi to Bethlehem is the first manifestation of the newborn Savior to people outside the Jewish community. The traditional date for celebrating this *epiphany* is January 6, twelve days after Christmas. So today we’re in this new season, which will last till Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. During Epiphany we’ll be looking at some of the ways Jesus was *manifested* as the Christ, the Son of God and Savior of all. We’ll look at his life as a child, his baptism, his mighty works, and his transfiguration on the holy mountain. All these aspects of our Lord’s life *reveal who he is*. They show us God the Father at work in the Son, calling people to faith in him.

That’s why Epiphany is a good time to emphasize the world mission of the Christian church, bringing the light of Christ to people in need all across the globe. Therefore I’ve asked our Missions Board to bring us “minute messages” each Sunday, highlighting the work of some of the Christian workers we support as a congregation.

So today we begin with that wonderful story Matthew tells about the Magi, the “wise men.” His Gospel describes their westward trek across the desert, following the “star of wonder, star of night” — the beacon that would lead them to Jesus, to the place where “they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him,” and offered their gifts.

So who were these wise guys, anyway? Traditionally they’re called kings, although Matthew doesn’t tell us that; it’s an inference from the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 60 that was read as our Old Testament lesson: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:3). And Matthew doesn’t say they rode on camels, either; that also comes from Isaiah 60: “Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord” (Isaiah 60:6). Matthew doesn’t even tell us there were *three* of these visitors; that’s inferred from the number of their gifts — gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

So these first Gentile visitors to the newborn “King of the Jews” remain *mystery men*. We really don’t know much about them. They came from the “east,” Matthew says, perhaps from Mesopotamia or Persia. We know about the Magi from other sources. They were a class of astrologers, men who studied the stars for guidance. Of course, such people would be on the lookout for special signs in the heavens. But how did they know this particular star was going to lead them to the Christ? The Magi were priests of another religion; why did they want to find the Messiah of Israel in the first place? Of all these details we’re quite in the dark. All we know is that they came looking for the King of the Jews, following his star but not knowing exactly where it was taking them till the Jewish teachers looked into the Scriptures and directed them to Bethlehem.

Listening again to this familiar story, I want to ask, How come the religious leaders of Jerusalem didn’t notice that star till the wise men called their attention to it? Why weren’t *they* excited about the possibility that their Messiah had been born in Bethlehem, the city of David? Why didn’t *they* prepare some gifts for the King of the Jews? They all knew that Bethlehem was where their new ruler was supposed to come from, just as the prophet Micah had said. But it seems they weren’t that crazy about the idea! Now this bunch of foreign stargazers shows up, asking for directions to the King of the Jews — and Matthew says the leaders were *disturbed* by what the Magi told them.

An *epiphany* is a revelation of God at work. When God shows up, *things change*. If you’re satisfied with things as they are, you *don’t want* God to show up. If you’ve been appointed to some high religious position by the ruler of your country, you really don’t want to hear about another ruler appearing on the scene! And if you’re the *ruler* — well, Herod’s pretty upset, too, about the news the Magi bring. He calls them aside, and says, “Yeah! Go look for that child, and when you find him, come tell me where he is, ‘cause I, uh, er — I’d like to go and worship him, too!” Now Herod was the guy who had murdered some of his own wives and sons when he got it into his head that they were plotting to undermine his rule. It wouldn’t have taken a rocket scientist, or the ancient equivalent, to figure out that Herod was up to no good! Matthew tells us that after the Magi had visited Jesus, they went home by another route because

of a dream they had. Well, we often dream about things that are already on our minds, and I'm guessing the Magi wised up to Herod pretty quick.

The Word of God "came to his own people," says John's gospel, "but his own people received him not." Instead, *outsiders* came to humble themselves before the Christ and honor him with their gifts. What's the Bible telling us? It's not the self-satisfied, the complacent, the defenders of their own turf who are open to the epiphany of God. It's *the needy, the travelers, the strangers, the seekers* who look for the manifestation of the Holy One. Those who think they already have God in a neat little box aren't interested in following strange stars, or following up on the words of an ancient prophet. It's those who are searching, night after dark night, for help from the heavens who will cross land and sea to follow his new star. It's those who are hungry for the truth, dissatisfied with the tired old answers of outworn systems and godless cultures, who come looking for a Savior. And when they find the Son of God they bow down to worship him, and offer their treasure in recognition of *who he is*.

And so the Magi come, bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. What do you give a baby? Shirley and I have had to ask this question twice within the past year, with the birth of new grandchildren. After you've had twenty-two, it's hard to think of new ideas for numbers twenty-three and twenty-four. How did the Magi know what to bring *this* baby? We don't know how they knew, but they brought special gifts — symbolic gifts that speak of who this child is that Mary bore in the manger of Bethlehem.

The familiar carol by John H. Hopkins says it so well. "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. Our wealth, our material substance, represents the investment of our time and the application of our abilities. Our "gold," whether it's money or some other entity, shows what's important in our life. What we do with our "gold" reveals what we hold to be of greatest value. It was important to the Magi to find the Savior of the world, and when they found him they honored him with their substance, that gold that speaks of his royal authority.

How do we allocate the resources with which the Lord has blessed us? For truly, our "gold" isn't about us — it's about God, and how he has worked in us to bring about the rewards of honest labor and diligent effort. Will we, like the Magi, recognize and honor our Savior with our gifts of gold? Will we bring our substance to the feet of our King, no longer a babe in a manger but the victorious Lamb seated at the right hand of the throne of God — "King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign"? What we do with our money and other resources tells the whole world who we think our King and Provider really is. When we offer our gifts for the work of the gospel of Christ, we join the Magi in declaring his kingship. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12). May our gifts on his altar be *worthy of him*.

"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. The Psalmist cries, "Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!" (Psalm 141:2). 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 cannot tell, but they did, and their gift shows it. And so they came, *worshipping* — bending the knee, falling down before the Christ, perhaps bowing in awed silence in the presence of a divine mystery they could not fathom.

As we enter the place of worship, do we come with that same sense of the holy mystery of God that the wise men brought to the Christ child? Do we come, offering the "incense" of our worshipful expectancy and humble adoration? Do we come with "prayer and praising, voices raising, worshipping God on high?" The Magi remind us that it's no casual thing to enter into the presence of the living Christ. They remind us that we don't come to be entertained, amused or even instructed; we come *to meet the Lord*, to encounter the overwhelming majesty of God. If that doesn't happen in our gathering, we haven't brought the right gift into his presence. We've brought another agenda with us, an agenda that runs counter to the purpose the Lord has for us when he declares, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Let's always come into God's presence as the Magi did, offering the gift of our prayerful devotion.

“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? Death is usually the furthest thing from our minds when welcoming a new child into the world. Yet, somehow, the Magi knew that this child of Bethlehem was destined for death — not in the massacre of King Herod, who murdered many innocent children in trying to wipe out this threat to his rule, but death on a cross bearing the sins of the world. Had the wise men heard the ancient words of Isaiah, “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3)? Somehow they understood what would happen to this child, and their understanding was perhaps confirmed when they saw the reaction of the Jerusalem leaders to the news they brought of the birth of a ruler. And so they came, kneeling in humility before a King, kneeling in worship before a God, and *kneeling in sorrow* before a Savior who would one day give his life for them.

How do we offer our own gift of “myrrh” when we come to worship the Lord Jesus? As we gather about his holy table, we remember the words of the apostle Paul: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). As we gather around his table, we hear his words: “This is my body which is for you; do this in remembrance of me. . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” Even at the most joyous of times — and Holy Communion is, and ought to be, a time of great joy in the Lord's presence — we never forget the price Jesus paid to reconcile us with our heavenly Father. We come in humble thanksgiving, remembering what Jesus has done for us, “sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,” his body “sealed in the stone cold tomb.”

“Arise, shine, for your light has come.” The Magi followed the star till they found the Christ, and the *epiphany* took place: the Savior was manifested to a world of those who seek the move of God, who hunger for the truth, who cry out for a vision of the glory of the Lord. And, as they say, “Wise men still seek him.” We follow the Magi to the same Epiphany, offering our gifts along with theirs — the gift of our substance to the King; the gift of our worship to the Son of God; the gift of our remembrance to the Savior who died for us.

But, in all our giving, something remarkable occurs. We receive back from our King far more than we could ever give to him. When the King comes to his own, he gives them over and above whatever he receives from them, for as the apostle says, “In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17). The Christ has all things to offer to those who, like the Magi, give gifts to him.

We offer our “gold,” the substance of our lives — yet he offers us life itself, a life overflowing with his abundance. We know the benefits of new life in Christ, the power to walk in the Spirit — victorious over the circumstances of the day, pressing on toward the upward call of God to the light of his presence. And his abundance is ours on the earthly plane as well. In following his way, we may very well find ourselves blessed with financial prosperity, physical healing, healthy relationships and the many benefits of conforming ourselves to the principles Jesus laid down for life in his kingdom.

We offer our “incense,” our praise and prayer and worship — yet he offers us the vision of his glory, high and lifted up, a vision that transforms us so that we “shine like the sun in the kingdom” of our Father. There's a radiance about those who have truly bowed the knee to the babe of Bethlehem, a radiance that lifts us above the mundane concerns of this tired old globe. The epiphany of the Christ reveals his new people as well, a people clothed in his likeness; as John says, “When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

We offer our “myrrh,” the remembrance of his sacrifice — yet he offers us Himself, in the emblems of his body and blood, that in sharing the bread and the cup we might be partakers in his divine nature, filled with the fulness of his life. Like the Magi, we traverse the desert wastes of this world, as homeless travelers looking for One who will take us into his family and give us a home. Jesus calls us into his household, welcoming the weary with his comforting word: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30).

And so the gifts *for* the King become the gifts *of* the King, whose gifts to us are so much greater than any we could offer to him. Shirley Anne has said this so well, in a poem that came to her only a short time ago:

*He walks
perimeters of our lives —
the walled outposts
of fortress built of wood and stone,
merchandise all on loan
from Him
who made the trees,
molded all the stone —
observes the trenches we have dug
to keep Him out,
keep our things in —
the camouflage we made to hide within.*

*See! In His hands are gifts
of wisdom's gold, and sacrificial love,
bought dearly on a cross.
New life with wealth untold
He offers, in exchange
for our impoverished dross.*

*He speaks — we do not hear.
The muffled voices in our head
distort His words, cause us to dread
this King with gifts to bring
more valuable than any
we have known.*

*He could break our clay,
whose power stays the sun and stars.
But that is not His way . . .
He waits for hearts to recognize
what He has done,
and after we have run the way alone,
gently says, "Come home."*

Sermon text ©2005 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable