

WISE MEN from the EAST

Matthew 2:1-12

In today's message, I want to focus on three things:

1. the gifts
2. the wise men
3. what we learn from the story

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote:

"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many **wise** according to the flesh, not many **mighty**; not many **noble** are called." (read I Cor. 1:26)

Not many **wise, mighty, or noble are called**...but there were some.

And today, we want to look at the account of the wise men from the east, men chosen by God to know Christ; men we can confidently say were wise, mighty, noble and called.

They came to worship and acknowledge by their gifts that He was the one born **King of the Jews**," the One revealed to them in the stars.

They were astronomers and had searched the stars to find knowledge of God, and God satisfied their searching hearts.

They were wise and I think, extraordinary men.

"They were so moved and convinced by their observations of the stars, from what they saw revealed, that they set out under the guidance of those starry indications to find the One who had been born in Judea.

Their purpose, that they might greet Him as their Lord and honor Him by their adoration and gifts" (Seiss p. 12). This shows me the true character of the travelers.

They and their traveling caravan were so impressive that their arrival in the capital city of Jerusalem created quite the stir. The Scripture says that king Herod and all Jerusalem were **troubled** (Matt 2:3). The word translated troubled here can also mean **agitated**. They were stirred up, but not with admiration. For Herod his stirring was a fear of a rival to his throne.

And the inquiry of the travelers: "Where is He who was born king of the Jews?" did nothing to settle those disturbed, especially king Herod.

In fact, Herod quickly got the priests and teachers of the Law together and Inquired (some translations: demanded) of them where this king was to be born. They knew from Scripture where he was to be born, but, based on their lack of response, they hadn't understood when he would be born.

The Wise Men:

God's Word doesn't tell us much about them. In the written account of Matthew, they showed no signs of desiring or seeking fame for themselves. In fact, after the Scripture account closes with them leaving Jerusalem by another way, we hear no more about them.

I personally would like to have been a "fly on the wall" when they returned home to watch them share about their adventure to see the new king.

Thousands of Christmas cards are sent each year with 3 kings traveling across a barren desert. We sing the song "We Three Kings" and some have even given them fictitious names.

There were likely many more in their caravan than just the three.

Based upon Herod's command to kill the children 2 years and younger, we can speculate that their trip may have taken 12-18 months to get to Jerusalem.

Most likely they didn't take the direct route across the desert but went by way of the fertile crescent where there would be water and supplies along the way of their journey.

When they arrived, Jesus was a "young child" in a house. (Mt. 2:11)

The Star:

There has been much speculation about the star.

Most often, I've heard some astronomical explanation...e.g. the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces in the year 7 B.C.

Some even suggested that it might have been a comet or a vision that was given only to these men.

The word for star is *aster* 792 which, according to Strong's concordance, is translated: a literal heavenly body, a star as strewn across the sky.

They, being astronomers, would know what it meant.

However, I think the scripture we have been given provide what we need to recognize the magnitude of this event, but not enough details to satisfy the inquisitive in search of greater details.

Matthew, the only gospel writer to record this story, was not interested in how many wise men there were, the size of their caravan, the length of the journey or even the route they traveled.

His interest lies in the fact that Gentiles from the area of Mesopotamia came to worship the Jewish Messiah.

His focus was on the gifts given and their significance.

The Gifts (Matt 2:11):

1. Gold

The first gift listed in the Scriptures was gold.

We know from history that gold is the precious metal coveted by kings. (I think we all would like to have gold?)

One Roman orator and writer wrote that in Persia, no one could approach a king without a gift and that gold was the appropriate gift for kings. So, if you wanted to see the king, you'd better take gold.

Gold was one of the great treasures of the ancient world.

We see evidence of the value of gold in archaeological excavations. When a tomb is opened and discovered to be filled with gold, it is evidence that the deceased was a person of importance, and most likely royalty.

Guards were even needed to protect the graves of the wealthy from thieves, who were also interested in "more gold."

In a museum in Athens, the mask of an ancient ruler Agamemnon is made in pure gold.

Even today, I see the marketers on TV hawking gold and giving assurances that in the years to come, gold will only increase in value.

When they presented gold to Jesus, they recognized he was the King and therefore had the right to rule.

Some people have suggested that this gold was brought to provide funding for Joseph and Mary's imminent escape to Egypt. It's true that they only had a

moment's notice to leave everything behind and flee to escape Herod's attempt to destroy Jesus.

How would they finance the trip?

And what would they do while living away from home?

The gold would be used to support their brief stay in Egypt.

Nevertheless, I believe the main significance of the gift of gold was to acknowledge that Jesus was a king.

In fact, He is **the King of Kings**.

And the wise men were making their own confession of faith in the king when they gave Jesus gold.

2. Incense: The second gift was Frankincense, another word for incense.

We can readily see the significance of the incense, it was used in the temple worship.

It was used to anoint the priests. It was also blended into the meal offerings that were to be offered to God as praise and thanksgiving. And...it gave the offerings a pleasant aroma.

I believe, in presenting Jesus with the gift of incense, they were recognizing His office as **our great high priest**.

The gifts of gold and incense symbolized the eternal royalty and holiness of Christ and were announced at the very beginning of His life on earth.

There could be no mistake as to who Jesus was.

3. Myrrh: (the third gift)

Just as gold spoke of Christ's kingship and incense his holy life, myrrh spoke of His death.

It's common knowledge that myrrh was used in the embalming process.

Although preparations for death are different today, they were still important then. The Scripture tells us that Nicodemus brought **100 pounds of myrrh** and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for burial (John 19:39).

If this amount was used for one body, you can imagine the commercial implications for that day. Myrrh was an important commodity for the merchants.

There was a city in Asia minor called Smyrna, one of the seven cities written to in the book of Revelation. This Greek word actually means myrrh. Its chief industry was the manufacture of myrrh.

This might have been offensive...to give a gift of myrrh at a child's birth.

However, this was not an ordinary child. And this was not an ordinary gift.

In this case, **it was a gift of faith.**

We don't know how much the wise men knew about Christ's future ministry but we do know that the Old Testament pictures Jesus' ministry as one involving suffering. Ps. 22 and Isaiah 53:4-5 (**read this**) are examples illustrating this understanding.

Jesus came to suffer for our sins and his suffering was symbolized by this gift from the travelers of the east.

And so, the gifts:

- Gold for a king
- Incense for our great high priest, and
- Myrrh symbolizing the suffering He would endure.

The Wise Men

Let's talk a little about the travelers from the east.

We don't know a lot about them.

One commentator said their title of Magi (Matt 2:1) indicates a high position or influence. From the word magi we don't even know if we can call them wise. Maybe, men of influence would be appropriate.

However, the account of their journey shows them to be wise.

1. They were wise enough to seek Jesus.

Through the heavenly sign, God had told them of the birth of the Jewish king.

They understood the magnitude of this revelation and made preparations to travel to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews.

How much wisdom is needed to prepare for a trip of 1-2 years. Just planning to spend a week away is a major task. Not to mention the expense.

However, surprise upon surprise, when they arrived in the capital city, they discovered that the new king's birth was not even a topic of conversation.

So, they inquired in the city (Matt 2:2).

There is no indication in the story that they went to Herod first. Herod comes onto the scene about halfway through the story, likely after the news of their arrival had reached his ears.

2. But they were not to be deterred from their journey's purpose.

They were wise enough to look for more information.

They could learn from others although there seemed to be a lack of information from the general population about the birth of the king.

And no one was celebrating a new king.

Some in their position would have been too proud to ask, but not them.

Pride of position and information would not deter them from their mission.

Their humility was rewarded. "But you, Bethlehem (house of bread – Greek 1035) Ephrathah (fruitfulness – Greek 672), though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me One to be ruler in Israel." (Mic. 5:2)

This was significant. Christ was to be born in Bethlehem.

They may have initially expected to find the new king in a luxurious palace surrounded by servants or even in the temple. (That's why they went to Jerusalem, the capital city.)

But he was in neither a palace nor a temple. So, the new king hadn't come from the royal family of Herod or the existing priesthood.

Where else could they go to find the new king?

They would find him in Bethlehem, an insignificant little village about 5 miles south of Jerusalem, a village that was scarcely big enough to put on the map.

This was foretold centuries before in the Scriptures. (Micah had prophesied the birth in the 8th century B.C.)

Now this is a strange picture. The chief priests and teachers of the Law knew exactly where the ruler over Israel was to be born.

And, the wise men have just told them about a heavenly manifestation announcing the birth of the new king.

We now have the where and when of the new king.

So...what did the chief priests and teachers do?

Did they saddle their donkeys and go with the wise men to Bethlehem?

What they did was to show a serious lack of interest in the new-born child.

Herod showed an interest but certainly not in a positive way.

Of course, the chief priests and teachers of the law couldn't be bothered.

They were in King Herod's presence. What better place to be to enhance self-designed and motivated ambitions.

They couldn't be bothered with a trip to such a lowly village to see a small child.

Makes me wonder what the wise men must have thought about these religious leaders.

But...the lack of interest of the religious leaders did not deter the wise men from their objective.

Today, we know the Scripture: "The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." (From Rom.10:6-8) He is very near.

We don't have to travel 900 miles by camel to find the king.

Note that when the wise men departed from Herod, they found God's faithfulness in their search. It was God who met them and led them to the child with the same star they had seen in the East, and they rejoiced exceedingly. (Mat 2:9-10)

3. Finally, they were wise enough to worship Him when they found Him.

The wise men were not like some today who are "always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (II Tim 3:7).

The wise men were not like this. I suspect that, although the Scripture doesn't say it...they were already planning to worship Him when they found Him. That's why they brought the gifts.

They showed a deepness of wisdom and character that far exceeded that of the chief priests and teachers of the Law.

Not many wise, mighty, noble are called but there were a few.

The short account of their encounter with Jesus reads:

They found Him.

They gave Him gifts.

They worshipped Him.

Their hearts had been prepared in advance for the new king of the Jews.
And that is what they did, found Him, gave Him gifts, and worshipped Him
They were simply overjoyed to have found the king.

And...why this story?

It's not a feel good Christmas story that gives us an excuse to seek gifts for ourselves.

Or an annual marketing celebration to solicit gift buying in support of the local merchants. I recall that some merchants make 40% of their yearly sales quotas in the month of December. And Christmas advertising begins long before the Christmas holidays arrive.

The purpose of the story is that we might find Christ as the wise men did, worship Him and give Him gifts.

What gifts can we give Him?

Why not use the first Christmas giving as our example:

- Consider Myrrh as a symbol of the spiritual death that should come to each of us because of our sin and then live for Him;
- Consider Incense as a symbol of our worship; and
- Consider Gold as a symbol of the right of Christ to rule in your life.

Let the example of the wise men guide us today. They gave Him gifts of gold (Christ's right to rule), incense (worship) and myrrh, daily dying to self so that He might live in us.

Extra:

Also note some of the character qualities of the wise men:

Perseverance/Patient endurance	Foresight/planning
Wisdom/wise/prudence	Self-sacrificing
Humility	Self control
Respectful towards authority	Belief with appropriate response
Generous/giving	Enduring faith