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**Title:** Three Gifts

**Date:** January 5 & 6, 2019

**Preaching:** Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

**Scripture:** [Isaiah 60:1-7](#)

**Text:** [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

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How many of you still have your Christmas tree up? We took ours down yesterday. You can see that the sanctuary tree is up even though the season of Christmas ended last night. Normally, it's down by this weekend, but we've left it up given the fact that today is Epiphany. And it is an Epiphany tree, at least it leans toward

epiphany. Your tree might too. What do you put on the top of your tree, a star or an angel? Some are star people and some are angel people.

Biblically, the angel represents those who had been waiting for the Messiah, for a sign from God, for a long time, like the Shepherds. They knew what the angel meant when he told them about a Savior, a Messiah. The angel story is a Christmas story and it comes from Luke.

The Star is for those who are searching, those on a quest to find out about this mystery and message from God wrapped up in human flesh and swaddling clothes. That's a star story about Epiphany from the gospel of Matthew. You may never have known that your tree had a theology, but now you do...except for those of you with no star or tree topper. But that's a completely different conversation.

So the tree is up because today is Epiphany. Epiphany comes after the 12 days of Christmas, falling on January 6<sup>th</sup> every year. In lots of countries around the world, trees are still up and homes and public place decorated because Epiphany is far bigger even than our Christmas celebration. So our tree is left up and as promised last week, we sang 'We Three Kings.'" Even though Matthew doesn't say they were kings. The tradition of a calling them kings got started in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by Tertullian and by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the kings had names Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. These names symbolize a width and breadth of attraction to the Gentile world. Melchior is Babylonian, Caspar Persian, and Balthazar is Arab. There is a first hint of the importance

of this story. Jesus was born not just for a select group; he isn't just for the Jews. God sent Jesus to all people.

The three---there might have been ten for all we know. Tradition holds that there are three because of the three gifts but the Bible doesn't use the number three. Most likely, the wise men, whatever the number, were members of the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, noted for their study of the stars as part of their religion. Matthew says they were good at it. They were wise men. Well, if they were so wise, why did they show up in the wrong place? If they were so smart, why did they go to Jerusalem? Someone has written, and I might add, it was a woman who wrote this, "They went to Jerusalem because they were men. If they were women, they would have asked directions and they would have arrived on time, instead of days late. But they were men, so they got lost."

Maybe. But here is another theory. They weren't lost. Because they were priests and deeply religious seekers, because they were learned scholars, they read the ancient religious text including the prophecies of Isaiah. Of all the prophets, Isaiah is the prophet that has the most prophecies concerning the birth of Jesus. Read Isaiah 60. It's not a text we read on Christmas Eve and you might have an 'ah-ha' moment about why these wise men show up in Jerusalem and why Tertullian called them kings.

Isaiah 60 is a poem recited to Jews in Jerusalem 580 years before the birth of Jesus. The Jews had just come home after a couple of generations of exile in Iraq. Jerusalem was a bombed-out city. They were in despair. Who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down and the economy has failed, and nobody knows what to do about it? In the middle of the mess, Isaiah writes this incredible, hopeful, optimistic poem, saying, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Isaiah 60:1). The poem goes on to imagine Jerusalem as the new center of international trade where caravans from all over Asia will come. There will be peace and prosperity and Jerusalem will be the "in place" again for people to come because "...the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60:2b-3) And guess what those kings will bring? "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." (Isaiah 60: 6c)

So maybe the wise men or kings aren't lost. They are fulfilling the prophecy of scripture. Like Matthew, the wise men know about Isaiah 60. They know they are to go to Jerusalem and to take rare spices and gold. Most importantly, they know that they will find the new king of all peace and prosperity. So they go to Herod, the current king of Jerusalem and ask,

“Where is the new king?” “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:2-3) A new king is a threat to the old king and the old order.<sup>1</sup>

There was a reason that all Jerusalem was frightened. King Herod was paranoid about his power. He was so insecure about his standing that every whiff of palace intrigue and potential opposition threw him into a murderous rage. He even killed one of his wives, several of his sons, and other members of his own family, fearing that they were plotting to betray him. When Caesar Augustus heard what Herod had done to his own family, he is reported to have said about Herod, "I'd rather be his pig than his son."<sup>2</sup> So, if the wise men have come before an aging, insane, and ruthless Herod, the King of the Jews, asking about where they can find the *new* king of the Jews, it would be like going to the Kremlin today and asking Vladimir Putin, “Where's the *new* leader of Russia? We have come to pay him homage.”

So Herod is concerned and calls in some of the Old Testament scholars of Jerusalem. He says, "Tell me about Isaiah 60 because these wise men are out there. They have a caravan of camels with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They said they've seen the light and the rise of a star and are looking for a new king. What's up with this?" The scholars say, “They are looking at the wrong text. Don't look at Isaiah 60. Look at Micah 5.” The new king is found in “Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, for from you (Bethlehem) shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” (Matthew 2:6a, c)

I don't know whether it is remarkable or stupid but Herod calls a secret meeting with the wise men and tells them where to find Jesus. Bethlehem. Matthew implies that Herod wants them to do the work of finding Jesus so that he can execute him. That would make sense given the number of people he killed. Later in the chapter, we learn that the wise men trick him and go home another way. Herod is furious so he slaughters all of the children under two in Bethlehem to try to get rid of Jesus. Fortunately, Joseph is already on the run to Egypt and Jesus is spared.

The wise men leave Jerusalem and go to Bethlehem. They go from the opulence of Herod's palace, a building that was three football fields long with massive towers and protective retaining walls to a tiny town, barely noticeable. They go from the center of the rich and powerful to a place for poor, insignificant people. Jerusalem is everything; Bethlehem is nothing. It's nowhere. They go and find the newborn king. Where is he? Not in a throne room He's in a stable, lying in a manger. And when they get there, "...they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2: 11)

You know this, you know what the gifts were. You can recite them, sing them; you've known them from childhood. But do you know what they mean? Gold is a sign of royalty, a symbol of wealth and power. But how was this newborn child, born not in a palace but in a barn, how was he a king? To leave a gift of gold for such a hapless child was a true testimony of faith that he would be the king of king.

The second brought frankincense. Frankincense isn't a gift for a king. It's a gift for God. Frankincense was used as incense in the temple, burned to provide a sweet scent as an offering to God. Did the baby Jesus look like a potential God? Did they know that he was Emmanuel?

The third gift was myrrh. Maybe this was the oddest gift or perhaps the most insightful. Myrrh was used as an embalming spice. It was used in burial rituals. When Jesus dies, Nicodemus takes 100 pounds of myrrh and anoints his body. Did they know something?

Think about it. These three gifts weren't just expensive presents offered on a royal visit. They were prophetic gifts, an amazing foretelling of what Jesus' life would be on earth. He would be king of kings, the Son of God, a Messiah. But just as the story is turned upside down, from the royalty of Jerusalem to the poverty of Bethlehem, from powerful to powerless, for imposing pretense to common humility, the definitions changed.

Jesus transformed the definitions. He changed kingship from power to service. He would serve the least, not those with the most to give. He would rule over a kingdom that has no end, which brings peace, not with sword or spear. Those things would be turned into pruning hooks and plowshares. His kingdom comes not with security and prosperity but with neighborliness and generosity.

Jesus changed the focus of God, coming from the throne room on high to walk with us. Jesus turns that upside down. God came down to earth. God comes to us. God approaches humanity. Jesus is God with us. What wondrous love is this? What stunning humility did this take?

And Jesus changes the definition of Messiah. The Messiah wouldn't end up in some kind of triumphant military parade celebrating a victory. There would be a parade to a cross on a hill. The victory of this Messiah comes with suffering and death. Myrrh is the anointing spice for a Messiah that would journey from this world to the next and offer the same for each that he saves.

Three gifts and three new, powerful definitions for who Jesus will be for the world and for us. It is why the season it is called Epiphany which means insight, revelation, and a vision.

And it is why it makes sense to start every year off with this story. When they saw the star, "...they were overwhelmed with joy and they knelt and paid him homage." (Matthew 2:10-11) How about you? Are you overwhelmed with joy? Are you prepared to bow down and pay him homage?

It's a good question to ask each year. Will you spiritually present gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, honoring Jesus as your king, revering him as the Son of God and lamenting his death for you as a crucified Messiah? If so, it will be a great way to begin 2019. As you leave for home, you might even feel different, maybe like you are on another road. You might even feel wise, which if you do all of those things, will indeed be true.

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<sup>1</sup> Off by Nine Miles, *Living by the Word*, Walter Bruggeman, Christian Century, December 19-26, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Macrobius, *Saturnalia* II.4.11