

ISAIAH 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. 5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

MATTHEW 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him,

"In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON

I pride myself on my gift giving. There's something super satisfying to me about giving a great gift to someone. It makes me feel like I know them really well, because I know exactly what they're going to love, right? During Christmas, I actually like the act of giving gifts to other people more than I care about receiving gifts, although that's fun, too. Giving a good gift requires two things. First of all, it requires knowledge of the person you're giving to: what do they like? What size shoes do they wear? What are their hobbies or favorite genres of music or whatever? And second of all, giving the right gift requires knowledge of your relationship to the receiver of the gift. Obviously I'm going to give a different kind of gift to John, as my husband, than I would to my sister or one of my friends, right? And there's a very different price range and style of gift that's appropriate for, say, your kid's teacher than for your own mother, right? I love finding and giving the right gift, because for me, it's a way of honoring this person whom I care about in a really tangible way.

Today's story, the story of Epiphany, of those Magi from the East travelling to meet the infant Christ, this is, in part, a story about good gift giving. About knowing what someone needs and making sure you are there to give it to them. Now, on one hand, these three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh...they're not exactly at the top of most baby registries I see these days. In fact, I know this is going to shock you, they don't make the list for 99% of new parents. I saw a cartoon a few weeks ago with the caption, "after the three wise men left, three wiser women showed up." And in their hands, the

wiser women come bearing gifts of frozen dinners, fresh diapers, and a live in nanny.¹ Yeah, probably a safer bet for Mary and Joseph.

But, as Babies R Us, amazon.com, and the modern baby registry were nigh on two millennia away, those Magi show up, Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh in hand, and those three gifts say something very specific about what they believe Jesus needs, and about their relationship to the baby.

Now first, gold. On one hand, useful, I guess, because it can be spent. But the gift of gold is a gift which represents royalty. As the song says, “Born a king on Bethlehem's plain, Gold I bring to crown Him again, King forever, ceasing never, Over us all to reign.” This first gift says that this infant child, is already and will become the King of his people. The first wise man gives a gift fit for a king.

The second wise man steps up, and he presents frankincense. I came to know the scent of frankincense first when I lived in Ethiopia. I've brought a little with me here, today, it's over ten years old, so the scent has faded, but pass it around and you can get a hint of it. All of the churches in Ethiopia burn a tree resin from the area in their buildings all the time, and it's frankincense. The smell hangs around the church buildings in a sort of fog. It's an old scent, going back thousands of years, and it's the same scent you probably would have known from the temple in Jerusalem. Frankincense has been burned throughout human history as an offering to the gods, a mark of worship. Again, the song we sing tells us this: “Frankincense to

¹ <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/03/ec/b0/03ecb0f3788245cf03c641ba1e016440.jpg>

offer have I. Incense owns a Deity nigh. Prayer and praising gladly raising, Worship Him, God on high.” When the magi presents Jesus with this bag full of hardened Frankincense resin, it’s a gift offered to a god. A temple gift. Just as the first gift of gold was offered to the baby king, so this second gift of frankincense is offered to the baby God.

Now, finally, myrrh. Myrrh is also a tree resin, it comes from a very thorny bush that grows in the Horn of Africa, much like Frankincense, and it is also used as incense in many churches today. The oil of Myrrh can also be found in the holy chrism oil of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. But they mix it in because of this story, it became an incense because it was a gift of the magi. Before that time, Myrrh wasn’t really used much in religious ritual, but it was used in both medicine and embalming. The oil of myrrh was sometimes mixed with wine and used as a mild pain killer for toothaches and other ailments. A perfume or ointment made from myrrh was used after death, by the Egyptians and many other people, to treat and embalm dead bodies, preparing them for burial. In the song, we sing these words of the third magi, “Myrrh is mine: it's bitter perfume, Breaths a life of gathering gloom. Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying, Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.” This third gift bears less of the hope and optimism of the first two, but it’s important nonetheless. This is a gift for a person who is going to experience both pain and death. It’s not a gift for a king or for a god, but it is a gift which offers insight into the future of this infant messiah. In fact, in the gospel of Mark Myrrh comes up again, as it is mixed with wine and offered to Jesus as he hangs on the cross. It’s a prescient gift, if nothing else, it’s a gift of sorrows.

These three gifts, as odd as they may be, they pass that first bar of good gift giving. Each gift, in its own way, shows that the magi have come to know this messiah, who he is and who he will become. A King, A God, a man of many sorrows. But I think these gifts also pass the second test of good gift giving. I think all three of these gifts are appropriate to the relationship between the givers and the recipient. In all three cases, these are not cheap or simple gifts to give. These are costly, beautiful, and honorable gifts. These are gifts which do exactly what the magi want them to do. They are seeking to find this child to pay him homage, as someone would bow before a king or a God, and these gifts do just that. They're expensive, beautiful, thoughtful, worthy gifts given to honor a person. As we see in the church pageant year after year, they are gifts properly given on bended knee, to honor the baby Jesus.

And I think this is the lesson we can take from this story of the magi: it's a story that tells us something important about who Jesus is, and what our proper relationship is to him. Like those magi, we should know that this baby will grow up to be a man, and as a man this Jesus will be a King, he will be a God, and we will also see him carry the weight and reality of suffering and death upon his body. And like those magi, we should know that our proper relationship to the infant Christ, to the man, the king, the God, the messiah, to this one, we should come to pay homage, to offer him the honor due to one in a place totally opposite where we actually find him, laying in a manger full of straw, wrapped up in rags, forgotten off in the animal stalls of some small town. No, the setting may not be grand or expected, but these travellers are wise, and we should follow their example, to kneel before the baby boy, the one born for us in the city of David, who is Christ, the king, the messiah, the lord.