

January 6, 2013
Epiphany 2013
Perfect Gifts
Matthew 2:1-12

Opening words:

Today, we begin a new liturgical season, Epiphany. It is one of those words that are only used by preachers and theologians. Epiphany means "manifestation." During this season we celebrate the fact that Christ came for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Sin has no exclusive hold on either group. All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. The symbol of the season is the Magi. Generally speaking, they were Gentiles who came to worship Jesus.

Tradition is rich on information about the Magi. The Bible never gives us an exact number of Magi. There was an old Orthodox tradition that said there were twelve of them. Today, it is universally accepted that there were three. Tradition tells us their name, description and gift. Melchior was an old gray-headed man with a long white beard. He brought the gold. Caspar was young and beardless. He brought the frankincense. The myrrh was brought by Balthasar, who was swarthy. This traditional information leads us to this morning's Gospel lesson, Matthew 2:1-12. Let me call this message *Perfect Gifts*.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 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.

What did you get for Christmas? I hope you didn't get one of these gifts. According to Gather magazine these are the worst gifts you can give:

1. Nose hair clippers
2. A pet rodent
3. A vacuum cleaner
4. Mascara
5. Hand-me-down clothes
6. A photograph of yourself
7. A year's supply of NutriSystem diet food
8. A month gym membership
9. Socks

How many of those things did you get for Christmas? How many of those things did you give for Christmas? I hope you received and gave the perfect gift. This morning I want to talk about the three gifts Jesus received from the Magi. Let us look at the text together.

We find ourselves this morning in the second chapter of Matthew. The challenge for us this morning is ignoring all the traditional information about this story. If you want to be Biblically literate then you must listen to the Bible. What does the Bible say? The Bible says sometime after the birth of Jesus Magi came to worship him. The Bible does not say they are kings. The Bible calls them wise men or Magi. Who are the Magi? They were not kings. As a group, their political interests had passed years earlier. They were more interested in spiritual matters. They sought God in a variety of ways. One of those ways was the stars. It is through their study of the stars they discovered a king had been born. It is at this moment they make one massive mistake. They assumed a king would be born in the palace. They went to insecure King Herod's palace. Sadly, this wrong assumption caused the death of baby boys two years and younger. The Bible is not always kind. Devastated by their mistake, they were overjoyed when the star reappeared. When they found him among the common in Bethlehem, they worshipped this special child and offered him treasures.

Verse 11 says, *"Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."* What kind of gift is that to bring to a baby? You can be honest. They were not as bad as a pair of socks or a picture of yourself, but they were odd. They seem odd to us because we are not as wise as the Magi. While they were blind to the politics of their day, they focused their eyes on eternal matters. From some unknown source they knew about Jesus' earthly arrival. They must have known what was going to happen to him in the next thirty-three years. So they offered him their gifts. Gold was the perfect gift for a king. Jesus is often called the King of Kings. Frankincense was the perfect gift for a priest. Jesus came to be the bridge between mankind and God. Myrrh was the perfect gift for someone who was going to die. It was used to embalm the dead. Before we go to the communion table, it is important for us to look at these gifts. So if you are ready to begin say, **"Amen!"**

Gold

Gold is a perfect gift for a king. What is gold? Gold is a precious metal that is reserved for special people and occasions. Did you know that an ounce of gold sells for \$1,680? How much gold do you own? It has been called the "king of metals". Seneca tells us that in Parthia, no one approached the king without a gift of gold. It is truly the perfect gift for a king. Never forget, Jesus is the King of kings. Jesus is our friend, but Jesus is not our equal. We must always meet him on terms of submission.

History tells us Admiral Nelson always treated his defeated enemy with kindness and courtesy. After one of his naval victories, the defeated Admiral was brought to Nelson. Knowing his reputation for kindness and courtesy, he walked up to Nelson and stuck out his hand to shake it. Nelson's hand remained at his side and said, "Your sword before your hand." Before we can be Jesus' friend, he must have our complete submission. Do you submit to Jesus or is he just your friend? Gold was the perfect gift for a king. Gold was the perfect gift for Jesus. If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"**

Frankincense

Frankincense was the perfect gift for a priest. What is frankincense? It is actually the bark from a Boswellia tree. That bark was used to make a sweet perfume that was used by priests during sacrifices. Those sacrifices were used to make connection between mankind and God. The Latin word for priest means "bridge builder." Remember, Jesus was the ultimate bridge between mankind and God. Jesus is the incarnation of God in our world. He became one of us. He didn't just study us from afar.

The scriptures tell us Mary and Joseph respected the Law of Moses. In Luke 2:22-40, we learn they went to Jerusalem in accordance with that law. After the birth of a son, the law demanded two things. First, following the birth of a son, women had to wait 40 days to go to the temple to offer a sacrifice. Mary had to be purified to re-enter society. Second, Jesus had to be consecrated to the Lord. At that time, Jesus was circumcised. They went to Jerusalem to attend to those matters. It was a big day in their lives but they didn't have a clue what was about to happen. Like every parent, they knew their son was special. They were about to find out how special.

They meet two characters during their time at the temple. The first was a priest by the name of Simeon. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and was told he would not die until he saw the Messiah. The Holy Spirit did not lie. One day he was in the temple courts and a young couple walked up to him. They expected him to just circumcise their son. They must have been shocked by the way the priest reacted to him. Simeon is overjoyed. He knows Jesus is the Messiah! The second person they met was Anna. In terms of this world she doesn't have much. She was an old widow who lived her life within the temple. However, spiritually, she is rich. She is a prophetess. She is the one who announces to the crowd that Jesus will bring redemption to Israel!

I love Simeon and Anna. They model for us the importance of patience and they remind us of the uniqueness of Jesus. They knew what we often forget. Jesus was not just another good man. Jesus was not just the leader of another world religion.

Jesus was different. Jesus was the son of God. Jesus was the incarnation of God. Jesus would forge a relationship between us and God that still stands today. In other words, Jesus was the great high priest! Frankincense was the perfect gift for a priest. Frankincense was the perfect gift for Jesus. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Myrrh

Myrrh was the perfect gift for one who was going to die. What is myrrh? It is a spice that was used to embalm the dead. I hate to say this on the first Sunday of 2013, but Jesus did die. You remember the story. Thirty-three after Jesus' birth he is executed like a common criminal. The Bible tells us he did nothing wrong. As a matter of fact, he did everything right! He never committed a single sin, which made him the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. That fact is only important if you admit you are a sinner. Sinless people do not need a savior. Sinless people do not need Jesus. However, you do need Jesus because you are a sinner. What does the Bible say? It says, "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God." That means anyone who has ever lived is a sinner. It means you are a sinner. Let me say this clearly. If you think you are going to heaven by your good works, then you are going to hell. Jesus is and always has been your only hope of salvation. Myrrh was the perfect gift for someone who was going to die. Myrrh was the perfect gift for Jesus.

What did you get for Christmas? I hope you got one of these. According to Squidoo.com, these were the most desired gifts for Christmas 2012:

1. Cell phone
2. Tablets
3. Televisions
4. Movies and sports streaming devices
5. Gaming
6. Remote control toys
7. Cologne
8. Docking systems
9. Amazon gift card
10. Unique cameras

Did any of you get any of those things for Christmas? They would have made the perfect gift. This is the bad news for today. Jesus didn't get any of those things. He got different kind of gifts from the Magi.

Do you remember what Jesus got for Christmas? Those gifts summarized his life. First, Jesus got gold. It was the perfect gift for a king. Jesus is the King of kings. Second, Jesus got frankincense. It was the perfect gift for a priest. Jesus is the bridge between God and mankind. Third, Jesus got myrrh. It was the perfect gift for one who was going to die. Jesus died so we could live. This is my last question for you today. What did you get Jesus for Christmas? Never forget, Christmas is not your birthday. It is his. If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"**