

January 6, 2019

Epiphany 2019

Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

Matthew 2:1-12

Opening words: Today is Epiphany, which means this is the twelfth day after Christmas. The liturgical season of Epiphany will not end until Ash Wednesday, March 6. The word *Epiphany* means "manifestation." Epiphany is the season we celebrate the divine truth, that Christ came for all people, not just the Jews. In some traditions, only the visit of the Magi is remembered. In other traditions, the visit of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus are remembered. Both events are significant because they emphasize the significance of Jesus.

Epiphany is celebrated differently around the world. In Spain, special pastries are eaten. In France, a flat almond cake is baked in the shape of a crown. In Mexico, a figure of the baby Jesus is baked inside of a cake. Whoever finds that figure is called the Godparent of the baby Jesus for that year. In Portugal, special carols are sung. In Italy, children receive Epiphany gifts, which were delivered by a fictitious old woman. In Germany, people chalk their doors to remind them of the visit of the Magi. In Ethiopia, Epiphany is celebrated with a three-day festival. How are you planning on celebrating Epiphany this year? Part of your celebration must include our reading for today, Matthew 2:1-12. Let me call this message *Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh*.

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.

In the first chapter of Luke, the angel Gabriel visits Mary. Gabriel tells Mary, she has been selected by God for a special mission. She will be the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. The divine messenger describes him this way in the thirty-second verse, "*He will be great and will be called Son of the Most-High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David.*" Gabriel wasn't wrong. Jesus is great. He changed everything. If you will admit Jesus is great, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the second chapter of Matthew. The scene is familiar; we visit it annually. We are more comfortable with the tradition of the story than we are with the Bible itself. According to the Bible, Magi came from the east to worship him, because they had seen a star. Who were 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. Like everyone else, they assumed this special child, worthy of a star, would be born in the palace. When they arrived at the palace, there was no baby, only an insecure king named Herod. Sadly, that assumption led to the death of countless baby boys. The Bible tells us the hard truth. Herod ordered the execution of every baby boy under the age of two. (Matthew 1:16) However, in the end, God wins. The Magi find this special child. No longer in a manger, the child is in a house. Their long search has been completed and they are overjoyed. When they finally saw the child, they did three things. First, they humbled themselves and bowed down. Second, they worshipped him. Third, they offered him gifts. You know what the Magi gave to Jesus. I don't even have to tell you. Everyone knows what the Magi gave to Jesus as a gift.

Many believe that act of generosity started the great tradition of gift giving at Christmas. It is obvious, Americans love to give gifts. I gave you these facts during Advent. The National Retail Federation estimated the average American spent \$700 on Christmas presents this year. As a country, we spent \$465 billion on Christmas presents. I must ask you: How much did you spend on Christmas presents this year? Perhaps, this is a better question: What did you get for Christmas? I hope you didn't get anything on this list:

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 Nutri System diet food
8. A month gym membership
9. Socks
10. A picture of yourself

I found that list several years ago. That is a list of the worst possible Christmas presents you can give. It came from Gather magazine.

According to Squidoo, these were the most desired gifts for Christmas this year:

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

I hope you got some of those things, but Jesus didn't get anything on that list, either.

What did Jesus get for Christmas? You know the answer. The Magi gave to Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They are odd gifts to give to a toddler. 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. They were not consumed by temporary things. They were consumed with eternity. From some unknown source, they knew about Jesus's earthly life. They knew what was going to happen to him in the next thirty-three years. Each one of the gifts was not just expensive, each one of the gifts was significant. Each one of the gifts emphasized a different aspect of Jesus's ministry. Think about those gifts for a moment.

Gold

Gold was the perfect gift for a king. What is gold? Gold is a precious metal that is reserved for special people and occasions. Did you know an ounce of gold sells for \$1,289.85? 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. We are not his equal. We must always meet him on terms of submission.

History tells us that Admiral Nelson (1758 – 1805) 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 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 a 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, 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, he 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 would happen. Like every parent, they knew their son was special. They found out how special.

They met 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. When Mary and Joseph walked up to him, they only expected him to circumcise Jesus. They didn't expect his reaction to their son. Simeon is overjoyed, because his long wait was over. He knew, Jesus was the Messiah. The second person they met was Anna. In terms of this world, she didn't have much. She was an old widow who lived her life within the temple. However, spiritually, she was rich. She was 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 2019, but Jesus did die. You remember the story. Thirty-three years after Jesus's 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."* (Romans 3:23) 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. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

In my home, it is traditional to take the Christmas decorations down on Epiphany Sunday. We still have a live tree, and it is shedding. The decorations are still up, and the exterior lights were on last night. It will all be gone by this evening, and our world will seem dark. I will be sad to see it all go, because we had a good Christmas. Soon, this year's Christmas memories will be lumped with past Christmases. We took many pictures, so we wouldn't forget. However, the one thing we will never forget is the true meaning behind Christmas. Christmas is not about gifts, it is about the incarnation of God. Jesus came to be our king, not our friend. Jesus came to be our high priest, acting as a bridge to link us to God. Jesus came to die for us; he was the perfect sacrifice. In my home, Christmas is not just part of the holiday season. Christmas is *Christmas*, a truly Christian holiday. Do you remember the words of Gabriel? Speaking of Jesus, the angel said, *"He will be great and will be called Son of the Most-High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**