

**Isaiah 60:1-7**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**January 3, 2021**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **ON THE TENTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS . . .**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On the tenth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me . . . ten lords-a-leaping . . . well, not so fast! For thirty-seven years, PNC Bank has calculated the total cost of the gifts given in the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” PNC calls it “The PNC Christmas Price Index.” In 2019, the sum was \$38,993.59. Christmas 2020 cost \$16,168.14, a decrease of 58.5%. As with just about everything else in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic took its toll on The Twelve Days of Christmas.

The costs of a partridge in a pear tree, four calling birds, seven swans-a-swimming, and eight maids-a-milking was unchanged. However, the costs of two turtle doves, three french hens, five gold rings, and six geese-a-laying all increased, some as much as 50%. The reason for the 58.5% decrease in total cost from 2019 was that the nine ladies dancing, ten lords-a-leaping, eleven pipers piping, and twelve drummers drumming were unavailable, due to Covid-19 restrictions. According to the PNC Christmas Price Index website, “The true cost of Christmas decreased in 2020, as this year’s index accounts for cancellations of many live performances. It’s a silent night at most symphonies and the lights have dimmed for many dancers this holiday season, which contributes to the year-over-year decline.” On this tenth day of Christmas, when you might have expected your true love to give you ten lords-a-leaping, “Similar to their dancing (ladies) counterparts, the Ten Lords-a-Leaping are mostly grounded this year, as benchmarked ballet companies report that performances are halted this holiday season. As consumer spend is allocated from services to goods, there also has been an uptick in consumer savings, which will ensure True Love is no scrooge next holiday season.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1979, a Canadian hymnologist published an article in which he claimed, with no real evidence, that The Twelve Days of Christmas was actually a coded Catholic catechism to help Catholics learn the faith when Catholicism was outlawed in England. snopes.com has pretty much debunked that explanation. The song probably originated from a children’s counting song.

Anyway, many people might wonder what and when are The Twelve Days of Christmas. We’re quick to move on to our New Year’s and Valentine’s Day celebrations when we’re actually still in the Christmas season. The Twelve Days of Christmas began on Christmas Day and end on Tuesday, which makes today the tenth day of Christmas (even if the ten lords-a-leaping haven’t shown up!). On the church calendar, Wednesday, January 6 is the Epiphany of the Lord. You may know it as “Old Christmas.”

We usually think of an epiphany as an “aha!” moment. When the word is capitalized, it refers to the church festival that commemorates the revealing of the Christ child

to the Gentiles. This is the story of the wise men which we heard from Matthew's gospel this morning. Of course, over the years all sorts of traditions have developed about these mysterious visitors from the East. They have been named and assigned countries of origin: Melchior from Persia; Gaspar from India; and Balthazar from Arabia. And, of course, we can't forget that the three wise men rode to Bethlehem on camels.

In 1895, Henry van Dyke published a story about another, fourth wise man named Artaban from Persia. Because Artaban stopped many times along the way to help people in need, he was late to Bethlehem and didn't see the Christ child. He spent the next thirty-three years traveling and searching in vain for the Christ, only to arrive in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. As he lay dying following an accident, Artaban heard the Lord's voice say, "Inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me." The other, fourth wise man died, knowing his gifts had been received by the King.

Well, that's all fine and good. But, even though we began worship today singing "We Three Kings of Orient Are," none of those familiar traditions can be found in the Bible! Here is how Matthew introduces and identifies the wise men: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.'" (Matthew 2:1-2) Matthew doesn't tell us their names, nor does he tell us which countries they traveled from. Matthew doesn't tell us how they traveled from the East to Jerusalem. Matthew doesn't even tell us how many there were . . . just that "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem."

But you know why we sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are" — because the wise men opened their treasure chests and offered Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That may be the one thing Matthew's gospel story has in common with the many traditions about the three kings who show up in our Christmas carols, on Christmas cards, and in Christmas pageants. They brought gifts to the child . . . and what strange and unusual gifts they were!

I saw some funny cartoons about the wise men and their gifts. One showed two of them holding a golden box and a flask, with the third one holding Frankenstein by the hand. The one with the flask says, "Right, we've picked up the gold and the myrrh . . . what on earth is THAT?" Another cartoon shows one of the wise men thoughtfully watching an infomercial on TV. The announcer's voice blares from the TV screen, "Order now, and get the gold AND the frankincense! NOW how much would you pay!?! But WAIT . . ." My favorite one (probably because, like so many people, we've ordered lots of things online in the past ten months) shows the three wise men standing in front of a stall with a large sign that reads GOLD. A smaller sign attached to the gold bars reads, "Customers who bought this also bought . . ." and beside the sign sit pots of frankincense and myrrh. Of course, there is also the cartoon "After the three wise men left, the three wiser women arrived . . ." with fresh diapers, casseroles for the week, and lots of formula!

While some scholars question whether Matthew really meant the gifts to be symbolic, John Henry Hopkins, Jr. uses a common and meaningful interpretation in his hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” We didn’t sing verses two, three, and four this morning, which say:

- \* Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain, gold I bring to crown him again
- \* Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a deity nigh
- \* Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh — not as practical as fresh diapers, casseroles for the week, and lots of formula, but a fitting tribute to the child who has been born king of the Jews. Some folks have tried to put a value on these gifts, much as PNC bank totals up The Twelve Days of Christmas. It’s hard to do because of the 2,000 year time gap and variations in the market value of gold and the two spices. From what I could gather, however, the value of gold, frankincense, and myrrh is a WHOLE lot more than what we would pay for gifts for twelve days, even if we could get all the dancing ladies, leaping lords, piping pipers, and drumming drummers.

And that’s the point . . . of Matthew’s story and for our lives and faith on this tenth day of Christmas. In the sentimental picture we paint of a baby in the manger, the wise men show up with their extravagant gifts that point to the reality and future of this child — King, God, and Redeemer. This child, born king of the Jews, is worshiped by mysterious Gentile visitors who made a tremendous effort to worship him and bring him their most precious gifts, which were in many ways a confession of faith.

On this tenth day of Christmas and on the threshold of a new year, let us hope and pray that we will have a true “Aha!” moment and realize again just who this King really is. Then we must decide how much effort we will make to worship him and what gifts we will offer Christ as we serve him this year

***Let us pray: Lord God, the coming year is full of uncertainty and hope. Whatever the year holds for us, though, we trust you, and we place every day of this year in your care knowing that, as in the past, you are with us, caring for us with constant love. And so Lord, we place ourselves into your keeping and dedicate our lives to your service through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The PNC Christmas Price Index at [www.pnc.com](http://www.pnc.com).