

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC***STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT*****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.***

Late Wednesday afternoon, I was sitting at my desk reading a journal article about Matthew's story of the Wise Men. My phone chirped and I saw I had a text from my good friend Bruce in Roanoke Rapids. When I opened the text I saw a cartoon showing Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus in a stable, with three figures standing next to them, each of them holding a different gift. The cartoon caption reads, "After the Three Wise Men left the Three Wiser Women arrived." The three dialogue bubbles above the wiser women's heads say, "Fresh diapers . . . Casseroles for the week . . . Wine."

I texted Bruce and said, "I like it! I'm preaching on the Wise Men story Sunday – maybe I can use this!" He quickly responded, "That would be awesome," to which I replied, "If I do I'll let you know." Bruce's final text said, "Please do. I would love it."

During the month of December (and even into the first few days of January), every time I walked into our kitchen, I saw this printed on a handtowel hanging on the bowl in which Christmas cards were displayed: "Three Wise Women would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts, and there would be Peace on Earth!"

Well, now, I don't intend for this sermon to be a skirmish in the ongoing battle of the sexes, but let's consider what that handtowel says up against what Matthew tells us about these mysterious Wise Men from the East:

1. "they would have asked directions" – well, according to Matthew's story, they did ask for directions: "they came to Jerusalem, asking 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?'"
2. "they would have arrived on time" – well, according to whose timetable? After all, wherever these guys were from, it must have taken them a long time to get there. Also, wonderful events in the Bible, such as the visit of the Wise Men to worship "the child who has been born king of the Jews" always take place at just the right time, that is, according to God's time.
3. "they would have helped deliver the baby" – well, there's not much we can say about this one, except to refer back to #2.
4. "they would have cleaned the stable" – well, that one depends on Mary, Joseph, and the child still being in a stable. But Matthew tells us that "on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother" – once again, refer back to #2.
5. "they would have made a casserole" – well, would you have wanted to eat a casserole that had traveled by camel for several months from somewhere as far away as Parthia? Enough said . . .

6. “they would have brought practical gifts” – well, maybe they didn’t bring clean diapers and casseroles for the week and wine, and maybe the gifts they brought don’t seem very practical, but let’s think about the gifts they *did* bring and what those gifts tell us about exactly who this child is who is born king of the Jews:

- gold – a gift fit for a king
- frankincense – a fragrant resin used in sacrifices to God
- myrrh – a resin used for anointing and embalming

So, Matthew may be telling us a lot about who this child is, not just for the purposes of his story, but for our own lives and faith some 2,000 years later. When we bought our new hymnals, *Glory to God*, for our worship, Karla gave me a wonderful gift in the *Glory to God: A Companion*. The opening sentences in the preface explain, “This Companion to *Glory to God* is intended to help worship leaders, especially clergy and musicians (as well as interested members of the congregation), to become better informed about what they sing. In particular, this information is offered here with the hope that it will enlarge the choice and enhance the use of what is sung, so that a congregation will have the fullest repertoire and will employ those hymns and songs in a way that engages people on multiple levels.”¹

The notes on Hymn #151, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” are most interesting. Our portrayal of “three” kings in Christmas pageants and Christmas cards is largely based on this mid-19th century hymn. Over time, these “wise men” (notice that Matthew doesn’t tell us how many there were) were named, identified as kings, and given their own set of traditions and genre of musical plays.

Through the years, in various settings including worship, three male singers would sing the first and fifth verses, while a different soloist would sing verses 2, 3, 4 respectively. The congregation would join in the chorus, “O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright. Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

The three middle verses describe the significance (if not the practicality) of the gifts the Wise Men brought the child:

- Born a king on Bethlehem’s plain, gold I bring to crown him again, King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.
- Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a deity nigh; prayer and praising gladly raising, worshipping God Most High.
- Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

The *Companion* comments, “Unlike the hymns and carols that narrate the accomplishment of events associated with the birth of Christ, this mini-opera set in the present tense provides a glimpse of three people on a still-unfulfilled spiritual quest. They are not searching for a child so much as for what that child will become, a Savior whom they acknowledge as royal, divine, and dying.”²

7. That brings us back to the final observation on that kitchen handtowel – “there would be Peace on Earth!” Oh, that it were so, and that Peace on Earth

was a done deal – whether back then when the Wise Men arrived at the house and found the child with his mother Mary or today 2,000 years later. But the apparent absence of Peace on Earth – both then and now – doesn't negate the universal significance of Jesus' birth and the promise of Peace on Earth.

Today's sermon title is taken from the childhood nursery rhyme:

*Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight.*

There wasn't much background information to be found about this little verse – the author is anonymous; the superstition of hoping for wishes granted when seeing a shooting or falling star may date back to the ancient world; wishing on the first star seen may also predate this rhyme, which first began to be recorded in late nineteenth-century America.³

Many people have tried to “prove” the Bethlehem star light, star bright by searching for astronomical phenomena occurring during the first century. Some people think they have conclusively proven the fact of the Bethlehem star. Others find no scientific basis for the Bethlehem star. But what if that wasn't Matthew's intention in telling the story? Maybe Matthew's meaning is contained in that anonymous nursery rhyme – “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight. Wish I may, wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight.”

What do you imagine the wise men wished for as they followed the star in the East? They might have wished for the very same thing we wish for still today – peace on earth, goodwill to all people. And, Matthew tells us, their wish wasn't just grasping at straws. “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed . . . they knelt down and paid him homage.” (Matthew 2:10-11)

The wishes and hopes and worship and gift-giving of the Wise Men on Bethlehem's plain bear witness for our own response to the child who is born king of the Jews. Today is called Epiphany Sunday, the traditional day of celebrating the arrival of the Wise Men. Some traditions call today Three Kings Day. You might know today as the 12th day of Christmas. Whatever you call this day, as the margin note next to our Opening Sentences says, “On Epiphany Sunday, we celebrate the revelation of God's promise and purpose to the nations of the world, as the magi came from the East to worship the Christ child, and God's covenant of grace is extended to all who believe the good news of Christ Jesus.” That sounds a lot like the wish and hope for Peace on Earth that God brings in Jesus Christ. As Ephesians 3 says, “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit; that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Just a few verses earlier, in chapter 2, we read about God's peace in Jesus Christ: “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (that is, Jew and Gentile) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus

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making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross. . . So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." (Ephesians 2:14-17)

At first glance, there isn't much Peace on Earth in Matthew's story about the Wise Men visiting the child and his mother. The political and religious powers-that-be, especially King Herod, were frightened by the news, ignorant of the prophecies, and calculating in their plans to get rid of the child. The full story tells of a middle of the night escape for their lives and a cold-blooded massacre in a vain attempt to defeat God's Peace on Earth. So, there's not much "meek and mild" in this whole story. And that's exactly why the star light, star bright in Bethlehem so many years ago is still so very much needed today – when the powers-that-be still fear the good news and rulers calculate how best to deny Peace on Earth and children still suffer.

Into this dark world God sent the Light of the world, and that Light of the world still shines and guides us toward God's Peace on Earth. Here is what a couple of commentators have to say about the meaning of the Wise Men and the star for you and me:

We begin Epiphany season learning about the Magi's declaration of Jesus as a divine person and a King. The story teaches us that Jesus is our King and we should put him first in our life. The Magi could collude with King Herod, but for them Jesus Christ is greater and more powerful than Herod. They endured a long journey from Persia to Bethlehem to meet Jesus, the King. They risked their lives for the sake of Jesus. They rejoiced when they met him. Matthew tells us that they paid Jesus homage, not Herod. Are we willing to put Jesus first in our lives? This is a personal question that requires a thoughtful response.⁴

The manifestation of God to the gentile nations represented by these Magi is something to celebrate, as is the human exploration of God's creation. But the fact that the story of following a sign in the heavens also leads to the powers and principalities, to racism and murder, should not be too surprising. As the hymn "We Three Kings" reminds us, Jesus will receive not only the gold of royalty and the frankincense of deity but also the "bitter perfume" of the myrrh. Alleluias will "sound through the earth and skies" for the babe who will be all three – not just king of the cosmos, not just God of the universe, but also the sacrifice that a broken, sinful humanity desperately needs.⁵

Thank God that God's peace in Jesus Christ is not just wishful thinking!

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, you revealed your Son to the nations by the guidance of a star. Lead us to your glory in heaven by the light of faith. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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NOTES

¹Carl P. Daw, Jr., "Preface," *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), p. vii.

²*Ibid.*, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," p. 159.

³"Star light, star bright," at www.en.wikipedia.org.

⁴Niveen Sarras, "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12," at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁵David Keck, "January 6, Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12, The wise men remind us that stargazing always involves politics," November 29, 2018 at www.christiancentury.org.