

Isaiah 60:1-7

Matthew 2:1-12

January 5, 2014

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

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

WHAT DID YOU GET/GIVE FOR CHRISTMAS?

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

For \$14.95 + \$5.75 shipping and handling, on amazon.com, you can buy a 4" X 6" ceramic wall plaque, handmade in the U.S.A. that says: "Three wise women would've 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."

That plaque is a slight variation of the more popular question/answer that has made its way across the Internet: You do know what would have happened if it had been Three Wise WOMEN instead of Three Wise Men, don't you? They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, put up decorations, made a casserole, and brought disposable diapers as gifts!

That last phrase — "brought disposable diapers as gifts!" — is why I quoted the second version. Disposable diapers as opposed to gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Keep that in mind as we think today about the visit of the Wise Men in Bethlehem.

So, what did you get for Christmas? I remember how much fun it was when I was a kid to talk with my friends after Christmas and share what I had gotten and to hear what they had found under their trees. One year, when I was in elementary school, we got to take our favorite Christmas toy to school for a day. Now, with the advent of YouTube on the Internet, it's fun to watch people getting surprised with unexpected gifts, such as a soldier dad walking out from behind the auditorium curtains at an elementary school and surprising his little boy, or the teenage girl opening a big box and finding the puppy she had asked for for ten years.

So, what did the baby Jesus get for Christmas? If you were here on Christmas Eve, you heard from Luke's Christmas story that he got a place to stay, some swaddling cloths to be wrapped tightly in, and a visit from the shepherds. Today, in Matthew's continued Christmas story, we hear that the baby Jesus got gold, frankincense, and myrrh as Christmas presents.

It's true that we have embellished Matthew's Christmas story over the years. We've given the "wise men from the East" names: Melchior, king of Persia; Gaspar, king of India; and Balthasar, king of Arabia. At some point, tradition identified these mysterious men with the sons of Noah — Shem, Ham, and Japheth — who are sometimes considered the ancestors of the three races of humanity. Of course, you don't find any of that information in Matthew's Christmas story. Matthew simply says, "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 even say that there were **three** Wise Men. We get "three" from the number of gifts — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew doesn't tell us **why** the wise men gave these particular gifts to the baby Jesus. His story only says, "Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Matthew may have meant nothing more than that the wise men from the East brought what they thought were gifts fit for "the child who has been born king of the Jews."

Again, people have spiritualized the meaning of these gifts and added an interpretation that Matthew doesn't include. Over the years, tradition has suggested that the gift of gold stands for the Kingship of Jesus. The gift of frankincense, which was used in the holy perfume in the Temple sanctuary and nowhere else, was said to symbolize Jesus' deity as the Son of God. Myrrh, which is an aromatic resin, was used in the royal anointing oil. We also know that Nicodemus, the Pharisee, provided about 100 pounds of mixed aloes and myrrh for Jesus' burial. Tradition, then, suggests that the myrrh offered by the Wise Men ties the Messiah's birth to his saving death on the cross.

In a few minutes we're going to sing Hymn #66, "We Three Kings of Orient Are." The three middle verses tell about the meaning of the gifts:

- * 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

The final verse sums up the whole song: "Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and Sacrifice; Alleluia, Alleluia Sounds through the earth and skies."

So, what did you **give** for Christmas? Christmas may be the best time of year to appreciate what Acts 20:35 says: "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering

the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” In many ways, our annual tradition of giving Christmas presents comes from the Wise Men opening their treasure chests and offering Jesus their gifts.

Here’s an interesting suggested meaning of the gifts the Wise Men brought: “These astrologers were laying down the substances used in their divinations, surrendering them to Christ; it isn’t what they give, but what they mean by the giving that matters. They are surrendering their life’s work, their system of belief, and their sacred tools, to the Lordship of Christ. Their divination had brought them to him in darkness and uncertainty; it had been a glimmer in the direction of truth. Now they see face to face, and having no need of divination any longer they present their tools in the worship of Christ.”¹

When our LOGOS kids were practicing the Christmas pageant, the three Wise Men took their parts very seriously. The adult directors gave them pointers about how to walk down the aisle in a very regal manner and how to bow down before the baby Jesus in the wooden manger. Then it was up to Wise Man #1 Dashawn, Wise Man #2 Zach, and Wise Man #3 James to interpret the “homage” shown by the Wise Men in Matthew’s Christmas story. If you were here on December 8 to see the pageant, you’ll remember how Dashawn, Zach, and James very humbly and carefully bowed down — indeed, almost prostrated themselves — before the baby in the manger.

What Dashawn, Zach, and James showed us that Sunday morning is a good interpretation of Matthew’s story about the Wise Men from the East. Before Matthew ever gets around to telling us *what* the Wise Men brought to the baby Jesus, he twice tells us *why* they made the effort to get to Bethlehem. At the beginning of the story, they tell King Herod, “For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When the star stopped, “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.”

These Gentile Wise Men, astrologers, kings, Magi — whatever we call them — gave themselves to the baby Jesus, before they ever gave him their presents. They gave him a long, dangerous journey from Persia or Arabia or, perhaps, India. They gave him their witness to King Herod, by asking “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” They gave him their joy and worship when they found Jesus and his mother. They gave him a chance at life when they left for their own country by another road, instead of returning to King Herod, who only wanted to kill Jesus. And, oh yes, they gave him some “things” — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But

now we can understand what they gave for Christmas in light what they got for Christmas: the joy of finding the King of kings and Lord of lords.

St. Bruno was an 11th century Benedictine abbot who founded the Carthusian order of hermit-monks. St. Bruno provides an interesting interpretation of the gifts of the Wise Men. He saw “gold, frankincense and myrrh as the offering of the purest of our wisdom, the discipline of our prayer, and the mortification of our lives.” He said, “Thus, we offer the Lord gold when we shine in his sight with the light of heavenly wisdom. We offer him frankincense when we send up pure prayer before him, and myrrh when, mortifying our flesh with its vices and passions and by self-control, we carry the cross behind Jesus.”²

Although you’d never know it by looking in the stores or watching commercials on TV, Christmas isn’t over yet! Today, January 5, is the twelfth day of “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” Tomorrow, January 6, is known as “Epiphany,” which is celebrated in many traditions as the day the Wise Men or Magi visited Jesus. While the world around us has already moved on to the next thing, we still have time to do some Christmas getting and giving.

What do you hope to **get** this Christmas? Look at the Lord’s table spread out before us today and you’ll be reminded of what we have gotten this Christmas — the gift of God’s only begotten Son, who became one of us, who lived among us and died for us, that we might live for God and serve others in the name and with the love of Jesus Christ. It’s no wonder, then, that we are told that the main purpose in our lives is to “pay him homage,” “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

What can you **give** this Christmas? How about giving yourself? How about giving your prayers, your devotion, your faith, your trust, your thanksgiving, your loving heart, your willing spirit, your helping hands, and, above all else, your worship?

As we come to the Lord’s table this morning, let us think about what God has given us this Christmas and what we can give God this Christmas. Thank you for participating in “choir practice” during the announcements this morning. Hymn #62 isn’t the most familiar hymn, but its message is powerful and timely, as we think about what we can give this Christmas and every day, and as we prepare to come to the Lord’s table:

*Bring we the frankincense of our love
To the feet of the holy Child,
Ever remembering God’s great gift
Of a love that is undefiled.*

*Bring we the myrrh of humility
To the throne of the Son of God,
Ever recalling the purity
Of His life when the earth He trod.*

*Ever secure in His changelessness,
Though the kingdoms of earth may fall,
Bring we the gold of our faithfulness
To the King who is Lord of all.*

*Holy the Infant and holy the mother
And holy and precious the gifts that we bring;
Praise to the Father and praise to the Spirit
And praise to Christ Jesus our King.*

Let us pray: Eternal God, by a star you led wise men to the worship of your Son. Guide us by your light, that we may see your glory, worship and serve you in Jesus Christ, and give the gifts of our hearts and lives to you alone. Amen.

NOTES

¹Canon Chris Pullin, “Epiphany 2010 Sermon,” at www.herefordcathedral.org.

²Ibid.