

As With Gladness

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois, January 10, 2016

Isaiah 60:1-11 NIV

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

"Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple.

"Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests? Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.

"Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion. Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations — their kings led in triumphal procession."

Matthew 2:1-12 NIV

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

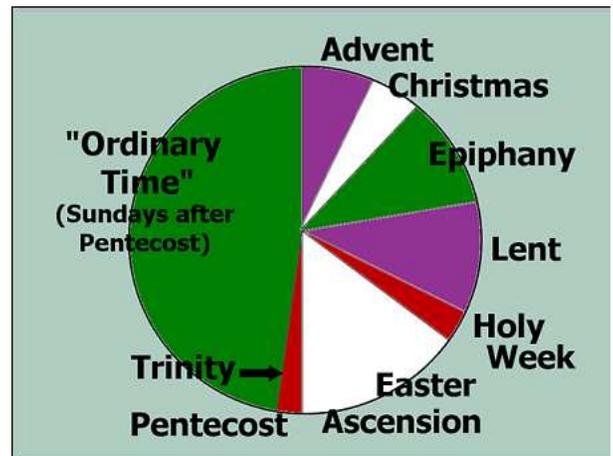
When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: '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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 and of incense and of myrrh.

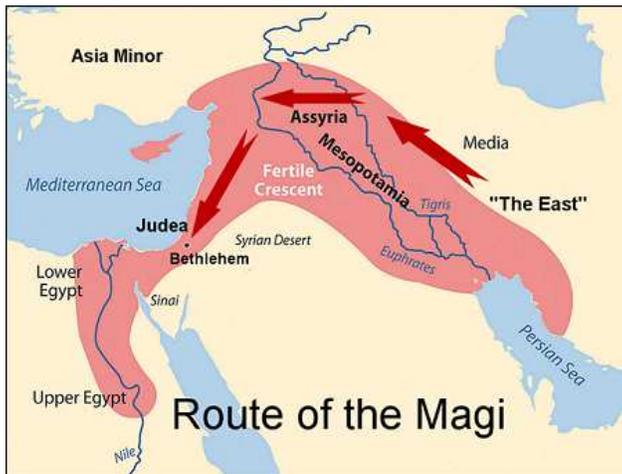
And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.



As you can see, our Christmas decorations are still up. I requested that they be left up till today, because we've only now passed beyond the Christmas season, which ended on Wednesday, January 6. That day, as you know, is called Epiphany, a name that means "manifestation" or "revelation." It's called that because it

was the visit of the Magi, the three “wise men” or “kings,” that was the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, or people outside of Israel. Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany, and after today we’ll change the altar color over to green which is the color for the new season. To me, the green color of Epiphany symbolizes growth — the growth of the Christian faith outside of its Jewish framework and into the world at large.

Although we often see Nativity scenes, on Christmas cards or in Christmas pageants, that show both the shepherds and the Magi present, these two groups didn’t visit the infant Jesus at the same time, and the Gospels relate their stories separately. Luke tells us about the visit of the shepherds, while Matthew relates the story of the journey of the Magi. And it’s clear that the Magi came to Bethlehem some time later, perhaps as long as two years after the birth of Jesus.



How do we know that? First of all, they came from the “East” or Orient — not the Far East but the Near East, an unspecified region but possibly from Mesopotamia or modern-day Iraq. After they saw the star it would have taken them some time to trek around the Fertile Crescent and down to Judea. They wouldn’t have gone straight across the Syrian Desert, but would have taken that roundabout route through the north so they could be sure of obtaining water and supplies as they traveled. Also, Matthew tells us that the cruel and paranoid King Herod, when he heard about the birth of a child who might be a rival “king of the Jews,” ordered all baby boys in Bethlehem who were two years old or younger to be murdered. This suggests that Jesus could have been born as much as two years before the Magi arrived. Furthermore, when these

“wise men” found Jesus he and his parents were living in a house, according to Matthew; they were no longer at the stable behind the inn where the shepherds had visited Jesus at his birth.

If you go to Bethlehem today, by the way, and visit the Church of the Nativity they will show you the traditional birthplace of Jesus in a cave underneath the altar. That’s not so far-fetched as we might think, because the Bethlehem region has numerous caves and they were often used to stable livestock. So it might be the actual place of Jesus’ birth, although it’s been worked over with garish decorations and doesn’t look anything like it would have appeared two millennia ago.

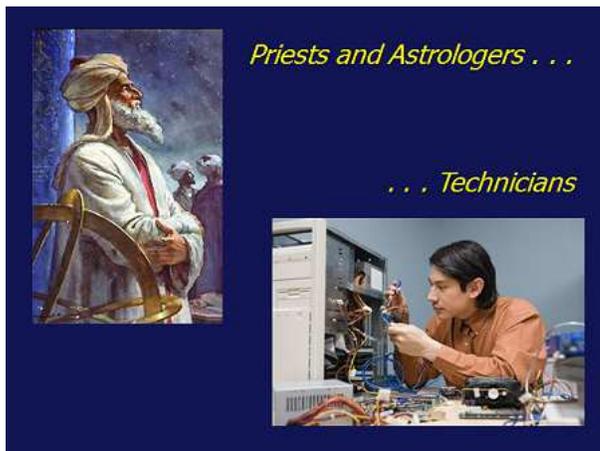
After the Magi left, as I mentioned, Herod ordered what’s traditionally called “the massacre of the innocents,” all those poor little boys who happened to be born near the time of Jesus’ birth. That event is observed on different days around this time of year in various Christian bodies, and is known as “Holy Innocents.” Matthew tells us that Joseph and Mary took Jesus down to Egypt, out of Herod’s jurisdiction, when they learned of the threat. But when they heard that Herod had died they didn’t return to Bethlehem, because Herod’s son Archelaus had taken his place. Instead they moved back to Nazareth, under a different ruler, where they had lived before Jesus was born.



All these details are interesting because they help us date the birth of Jesus. As you know, Jesus wasn’t born in the year One. The calendar we use today in the Western world is known as the Gregorian Calendar, instituted in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII. It was a correction of the Julian Calendar that goes back to the time of Julius Caesar, but Christians developed the practice of numbering the years after the birth of Jesus, AD or *Anno Domini*, the “year of our Lord.” However, the people who calculated the time of the birth of Jesus didn’t get it exactly right. Historical research indicates that Jesus was born some time before the year One. For one thing, we know that King Herod (known as “Herod the Great”) died in what we now call 4 BC. If the Magi visited Herod around two years after Jesus’ birth, then Jesus could have been born around 6 BC. So where are

we today, having just ended the year 2015? Add 6 to 2015 and you get 2021 years since the birth of Jesus; but that's not right since there's no year Zero, so subtract one from that and you get 2020. Do you remember the discussion in 1999 about what might happen to computers, etc. when the calendar rolled around to 2000 and brought us into the third millennium AD? Whatever the technological issues of the calendar transition, when 2000 came we had already been in the third millennium after the birth of Jesus for five years.

But let's get back to the Magi, those mysterious figures from the East whom we sometimes call the "three kings" or "wise men." What do we know about them? Actually, very little. We know that the Magi were a class of priests or astrologers — people who studied the stars for guidance, as did the Magi in Matthew's account. They weren't Jewish, of course, because the Law of Moses specifically forbids worshiping the heavenly bodies or using them as a guide for making life decisions (Deuteronomy 17:3). These Magi came from distant land somewhere to the east of Judea, as we've said. Somehow they knew about the Hebrew Scriptures, and their expectation of a new King or Messiah who was to arise, and when they observed the star of Bethlehem they realized that something was up. (As to exactly what the star of Bethlehem was, several theories have been proposed but we won't go there today.)



Were these priestly astrologers prepared to abandon their own religion, whatever it was, in order to worship the "king of the Jews?" Records indicate that the Magi of the ancient world were more like technicians today; they were priests, but they were prepared to exercise their skills in whatever religious environment they found themselves — just as, today, you might ask a technician to fix your computer regardless of whether it had Windows, Macintosh, Linux or some other operating system. These Magi we read about in the Gospel found the "king of the Jews" and, we are told, they worshiped him and offered their gifts. What did they do after that? Did they "change their operating system" to biblical faith only? Did they go on to serve only the God of Israel? Did they eventually become Christian believers if they lived to hear of Jesus' resurrection?

Legends about them abound, and they've even been given traditional names: Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior. But nobody knows what really happened to them after their visit to Bethlehem. All we have is this brief account Matthew gives us. But their visit to Bethlehem was the Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus to the nations of the world. It was the anticipation of Jesus' message to his disciples after his resurrection: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15).

We think we know more about these mysterious visitors from the Orient than we really know! How many of them were there? Matthew doesn't tell us there were three of them; we get that number from the three gifts they offered: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Did they ride on camels? Matthew doesn't state that, either; that idea comes from the prophecy we read from Isaiah 60, for verse 6 (RSV) states, "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD."

Were these mysterious figures not only Magi but kings? That also comes from Isaiah 60:3 (RSV): "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." That wonderful prophecy in the Book of Isaiah about the return of God's glory to Zion, the sanctuary of Israel, has lent its color and imagery to our picture of the visit of the Magi. But that's perhaps as it should be, for the coming of Jesus with his gospel of the kingdom of God was, indeed, the return of God's glory to the nation he had chosen to serve him, but which had turned away and failed to fulfill the mission to which the Lord had called them when he called their forefather Abraham to bless all peoples of the earth.



What about those three gifts of the Magi — gold, frankincense, and myrrh? The familiar carol by John Henry Hopkins, Jr. brings out what these gifts mean. It also suggests how we, too, might respond to the birth of our King.

*Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,
Gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.*



Gold is still a symbol of power, a repository of wealth. Watching the news on TV, how many ads for gold do you see every day? In the uncertainty of today's world economy, some people are investing in gold. As Christians, we don't rely on *gold* to see us through difficult times. After all, you can't eat gold, or heat your house with it. We trust the Lord to give us wisdom in managing our resources, whatever they are, and to provide the things Jesus said he already knows we need.

Nevertheless, gold is still the symbol of excellence and superiority, like the "gold standard" for some type of equipment, or the "gold medal" presented to someone who achieves something special. In the gifts of the Magi, gold symbolizes the royal power of Messiah Jesus. The Hebrew Scriptures proclaim that the Messiah, the anointed

One of Israel, is to be the ruler of all the earth and not just some small nation on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. And the resurrection of Jesus makes it evident that he is that Messiah, who declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

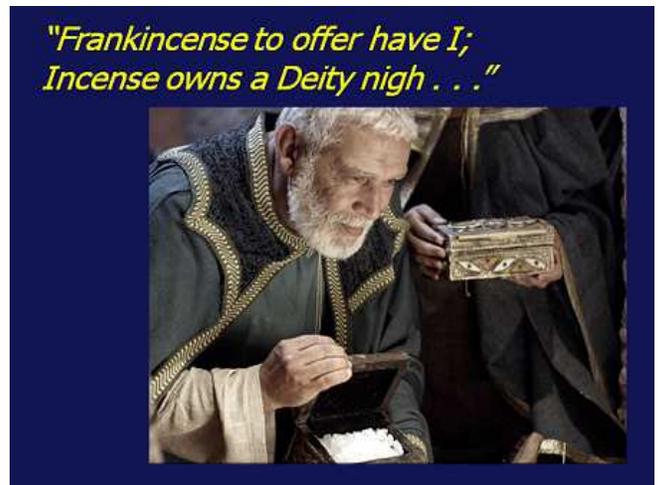
Gold also represents *our* wealth, however great or small that may be. This gift of the Magi reminds us that, as worshipers of God, we need to "put our money where our mouth is." We may think of ourselves as loyal Christian believers, but if we're holding back our "gold" this might be an indication that our faith isn't as strong as we would like it to be — perhaps we're uncertain about whether Jesus really is the King the Scriptures make him out to be. (I'm thankful that in this church I don't really have to say much about that, because our treasurer's reports at board meetings are always positive.)

The next stanza of the familiar carol brings out the significance of the Magi's second gift to the newborn Jesus:

*Frankincense to offer have I;
Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, voices raising,
Worshipping God on high.*

In Scripture, incense is the symbol of prayer and worship. In the Temple of Israel there was a special "altar of incense" in addition to the altar of sacrifice. The wafting smoke, the pungent aroma of the incense offering helped worshipers to sense the presence of God in the Temple, which was the meeting place of heaven and earth. If the worshiper couldn't be present at the Temple, because he lived too far away or for some other reason, he could pray

with Psalm 141: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice!" (Psalm 141:2). The imagery of incense carries over into the New Testament as well, where it speaks of the presence of the Messiah; Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Corinthians 2:16).



The Magi's offering of incense, then, reminds us of prayer and worship in the presence of the holy God. But what is worship? In the Bible, worship is more than coming to church, sitting down, listening to a preacher, and maybe singing a song or two. This is what Matthew tells us about the worship of the Magi: "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him" (Matthew 2:10-11). The presence of the newborn King didn't just impress the Magi as an idea to be considered, or even as something to be talked about. It moved them to action — visible action. They "were overjoyed," or as another translation says, they "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." The Bible's repetitive way of describing what they did suggests it was something you could see; perhaps these dignified eastern visitors shouted for joy or even danced around.



And when they entered the house where Jesus was they didn't just hand over their gifts and stand around watching the Holy Family's reaction. Matthew says they "bowed down and worshiped" the child Jesus; the Greek word here, which is the usual biblical word for worship, indicates something you do with your whole body. You don't just bow your head; instead, you get down on your knees and maybe even prostrate yourself on the floor. In the ancient world this was the expression of affirming your loyalty to a higher authority, *which is what worship really is*.

By biblical standards, what we call "worship" today is pretty tame stuff. I think the Magi set us an example with their gifts; they not only "put their money where their mouth was," they also put their bodies into it as well. I've

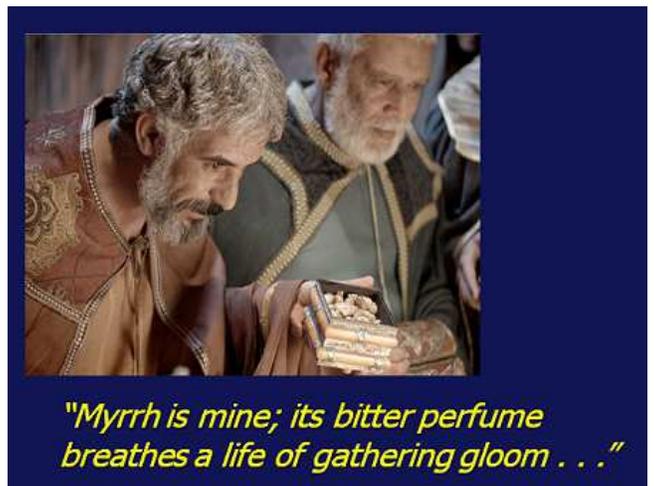
seen that happen here, as some of you have moved a few rows closer to the front, or come forward for special prayer; and I believe a while ago I even saw someone raising their hands in praise — in addition to me, I mean! Whatever it is you feel comfortable doing, do *something* to make it evident that worshiping the Lord isn't just a passive exercise or just a head trip.

Let's take up the third gift of the Magi, as described in the carol by John Henry Hopkins:

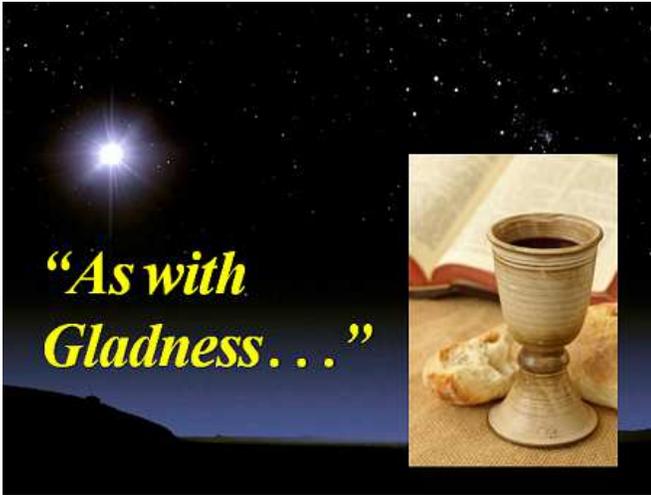
*Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

For some reason, when thinking about the meaning of these gifts of the Magi, many Christians seem to have concentrated on the third gift of myrrh. Myrrh is a spice used in preparing a body for burial, and it seems a strange gift to offer a newborn child because it speaks of his eventual death. Of course, this gift was appropriate. We understand that the death Jesus would undergo on his cross was part of the plan of God to deal with human sin — by collecting it all in himself, so to speak, and bearing its penalty. And sometimes that's all we think of when we consider Jesus; as a favorite hymn says, "And when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in."

But *Jesus wasn't born just to die*; if that were so, why did Matthew and the other Gospel writers bother to tell us what he did between his birth and his death, between Bethlehem and Calvary? (And John tells us, at the end of his Gospel, that Jesus did a lot more that there wasn't room to write down.) As we think of the gift of myrrh, and the cross that awaits the newborn Savior, let's also remember the gold and the frankincense. Let's remember that Jesus is also the King; as another carol says, "He rules the world with truth and grace." As the Ruler he deserves our gift of "gold," our material substance that helps his church to go forward in the service of his



kingdom. Let's remember that Jesus is the living presence of God among men, and therefore we owe him our humility, our worship, and our praise.



In one way, all three of these gifts of the Magi meet when we gather at the Lord's Table. Jesus gave us this act as a way to proclaim his death in our behalf. But these symbols of the bread and cup also proclaim his life in our midst, our glorious King — the Messiah, raised from the dead. And in gathering to receive these emblems we're also worshiping: doing something with our bodies to express our loyalty to Jesus. The myrrh, the gold, and the incense are all here together.

There's another carol about the Magi that's not in our hymnal. It's printed on the back of your bulletin, and the first stanza goes like this:

*As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light,
Leading onward, beaming bright;
So, most gracious Lord, may we
Evermore be led to thee.*

The Magi came with gladness, with rejoicing, to the house in Bethlehem where they found the Lord. Let's come today with that same joy and gladness to the table our risen Lord has set before us.

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