

Sermon for January 4, 2026
Epiphany Sunday
"How About the Gifts?"

Matthew 2:1-12

We all know about the Kings. We have seen their arrival dramatized a thousand times, and we have all imagined it a million times. Three men in long robes wearing crowns come on camels to the manger on the heels of the shepherds. Some of us may even remember their names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.

It is a nice picture, but it doesn't fit with what the Bible says. I am sorry to disillusion you but these wise men probably didn't arrive in Bethlehem until two years after Jesus' birth. There are several indications of this in Matthew's Gospel. First of all the Bible says that the Wise Men entered a house not a stable. It also says that they presented their gifts to a child not to an infant. All that indicates that it was sometime after Jesus' birth that the wise men arrived but not how long. There is evidence that it was about two years. When the Wise Men went to Herod, he asked when the star appeared. The appearance of the star would have coincided with Jesus' birth. So when Herod wants to kill Jesus, he orders all the children two years and under killed "according to the time that they had learned from the Wise men." (Matt. 2:16)

Not only is our conception of when the wise men arrived not compatible with Scripture, but so are other aspects of the common picture of the Wise Men. First of all they were not Kings in the common sense of the word. The word used in the Greek is magoi where we get the word Magi. Magi were ancient eastern philosophers and religious wise men. Secondly the Bible does not say that they were riding camels. The idea that they were riding camels comes from Isaiah 60 where it says that 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." This is apparently a prophecy of the coming of Gentiles to worship the God of Israel, but church tradition has also taken the camel part of the prophecy literally and decided that the wise men must have been riding camels. How many wise men were there? Three, right! Yet church tradition has also said it was two or four or 12. The most popular number "3" was probably derived from the number of gifts mentioned. Quite simply we don't know how many wise men there were, much less what their names were or how they arrived.

In conclusion I guess you could say that the Bible doesn't tell us much about the kings and that people have filled in the gaps with their imaginations. Yet, what it does tell us is important. It tells us that they were from foreign lands - Gentiles. Jesus came to save not just Israel but the world and here is the first evidence of that Divine plan. Oddly enough it also tells us exactly what gifts the wise men brought. Think about it! We don't even know how many Wise men there were but we know exactly what they gave to Jesus! For this reason, I want to focus on the gifts this morning because I believe there is some meaning in this detail.

So why does Matthew go to the trouble of identifying these specific gifts. One possibility is to demonstrate that this event is a fulfillment of prophecy. Isaiah had said that Gentiles would come bringing Gold and Frankincense. While this is part of what the spirit is leading Matthew to do there is more. If that were his only motive in naming the gifts, he would not have mentioned Myrrh. He might have written "Gold, Frankincense, and other gifts." You see Myrrh is not mentioned in any prophecies that I know of. So, there must be some other significance to these gifts!

What is the significance of Gold? I like the way the song puts it "Gold I bring to crown him again." We often speak of the wise men as kings when actually they were philosophers and magicians, but the idea that Jesus is the King of Kings is expressed in their arrival. The gold is a symbol of that Kingship.

Of course Jesus had no need of a Gold crown to demonstrate for the world his kingship. Partially because his Kingdom was not of this world. He was not a Monarch like Caesar or Cleopatra who ruled for a short time over a limited territory. Jesus was there at creation and was King of the entire universe. As the King of kings he would wear a crown - a crown of thorns.

The first gift: gold, draws our attention to these truths.

The second gift is Frankincense. Frankincense was used in worship. It was made from the sap of the frankincense tree. In Old Testament Judaism it was used in a number of different ways to worship God. It was one of the ingredients in the holy anointing oil (Ex. 30:34). It was also burnt as part of the cereal offering (Lv. 6:15) and placed on the showbread in the tabernacle (Lv. 24:7).

This gift demonstrates Jesus priestly roll, but it also suggests that Jesus will be more than any earthly priest. Like earthly priests he would go before God interceding on behalf of the faithful. He would also offer a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Some would also suggest that this gift reveals that Jesus himself is worthy of worship. The Gold shows that he is a King, but the Frankincense reveals that he is God in the flesh. Not only will this child lead people to worship God; he himself will also be worshipped.

The last of the gifts was Myrrh. This is the strangest and most shocking of all the gifts. Of course like Gold and Frankincense, Myrrh was a valuable commodity, but it was used mainly as for anointing the dead. When the first gifts were presented to the child Messiah, I am sure Mary and Joseph nodded in approval and understanding, but when the last gift was presented, they probably looked puzzled.

Who would give embalming fluid to a King? Yet, the gift was prophetic just like the others. Jesus was the King of kings as the Gold suggested, and he was the great high priest and God incarnate as the Frankincense proclaimed. Jesus had also come to die.

I remember singing the hymn "What child is this?" in an Episcopal church. The refrain in our hymnal goes: "This, This is Christ the king whom shepherd's guard and angels sing." The refrain for the first two verses was the same in the Episcopal hymnal, but the refrain for the last verse was different and it shocked me with its profoundness when I sang it: "Nails, spear shall pierce him through the lamb of God for me for you." His death as the Lamb of God slain for the sins of the world is the truth behind this gift. That was God's goal in the incarnation; that by sending his Son to live a perfect sinless life Jesus would be the only worthy sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world.

Each of the gifts of the wise men reveal something about who Jesus is and what he came to do. The gold shows that Jesus came to rule the hearts of people as the King of kings. The Frankincense speaks of Jesus' role as our great high priest making offerings for the faithful and that Jesus came as God in the flesh - the object of our worship, and the Myrrh reminds us that Jesus came to die - for the sins of the world. He came to die for your sins and my sins.

What do your gifts say about who Jesus is and what he does in your life? You know our lives are our gifts to Jesus. The way we live are the Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh that we present to the King of kings.

What does your life say about Jesus? Do your words and actions demonstrate the love and righteousness of Jesus? Do your prayers point to the one who intercedes on behalf of all who believe? Do your offerings speak prophetically about the one who gave his life for sinners like you and me?

If our lives don't reflect these truths, then maybe we need to reevaluate what it is we really are giving to God.