

Sermon Series: Christmas 2013

December 22, 2013

Title: A Gift Fit for a King

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Summary: The coming of the magi to worship the new-born King of the Jews raised the question of who really was the true King: Herod the Great or Jesus the baby? They made the right choice and brought gifts fit for a king. We face the same choice of kings today. What gift do we bring that is a gift fit for a king?

"We Three Kings of Orient Are"

The Story of the Wise Men:

Three kings: we see them in every Christmas pageant. They march to the manger in turbans and robes, bearing their gifts. We sing about them in carols like "We Three Kings of Orient Are." We arrange them and their camels in our Nativity Sets on the mantle or under the Christmas tree. They are as much a part of the Christmas Story as the angels and the shepherds.

But read Matthew's story of the strangers from far away bringing gifts to the new-born King. When you do you don't find any camels. You don't find any kings from the East. Matthew describes them as "magi," or "wise men." Matthew doesn't even tell us *how many* they were.

So just how did we come up with "We Three Kings" and camels for them to ride on?

An ancient prophecy:

The answer lies in an ancient prophecy that comes to us in the Book of Isaiah, a prophecy that in many ways came true when magi from the East came looking for the newly born King of the Jews. It reads like this:

Isaiah 60:1-6 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 hip.**

**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.**

Promise fulfilled:

Here is the promise that God will one day break into the darkness of this world with His unquenchable light.

- It speaks of the kings of the nations coming to Him and His people.
- It speaks of camels bringing gifts of gold and incense from three different lands east and south of Israel: Midian, Epha and Sheba.
- Three kingdoms, three kings, camels and gifts of gold and incense.

No doubt this prophecy was very much on Matthew's mind as he told the story of the magi coming with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The magi were students of the night sky, seeking to discern the will of the gods in the movements of the planets and stars. And in their nighttime studies God had caused His glory to "rise" upon them, signaling to them that His long-awaited King had been born in the land of Judea.

Thus it is that Matthew writes:

Matthew 2:1-2 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 when it rose and have come to worship him.”

The "nations" had seen the light of God's glory and were coming to the brightness of His dawn! And notice how God made Himself and His plan known to them: He revealed His plan in a way that made sense to them -- through the night sky. He met them "where

they were." The star rising in the east could not tell the whole story, but it certainly got them pointed in the right direction. And now, pagan magi began a journey out of the night and into God's new dawn.

Two Kings

The Big Question:

When the magi arrived in Jerusalem they had but one question: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Notice that they were *not* asking, "Where is the king over the Jews?" They were asking, "Where is the one **who has been born** king of the Jews?"

As a matter of fact, the Jews already had a king ruling over them. His name was Herod the Great, and he had been king for some 30 years at the time of Jesus' birth. Herod, more than anything else, wanted to be known as "King of the Jews," not because he was a religious or God-fearing king, but because he wanted the complete loyalty of the people he ruled. But Herod had a problem: he was only "half Jewish" by birth. And he had no connection whatsoever to the genealogy of King David. Therefore, he could not in any way be "the one who has been born king of the Jews." He was king because of his craftiness, brutality and ability to stay on the right side of the Romans.

The other option:

Of course, Matthew has already alerted us to the fact that there was another option: a baby born in Bethlehem named Jesus.

The great message of the first chapter of Matthew focuses squarely on this question of who would be "King of the Jews." Matthew begins with these words:

Matthew 1:1 NIV

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

In every sense it is the genealogy of the King of the Jews:

- Jesus is referred to by the royal title, Messiah (or Christ), at the beginning and the end of the genealogy.
- Jesus is identified as "the son of David," and thus is fully qualified to be King of the Jews.
- The genealogy helps us understand why Jesus would be known by the name Immanuel, a name God said would apply to a promised Jewish king.

Finally, the name "Jesus," which means "Yahweh saves," was to signify the King's great victory over sin and death:

Matthew 1:21 NIV

"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew leaves no doubt but that the long-awaited King of the Jews is already present in a little town 5 miles away from the royal city where the current ruler encounters these strange visitors from afar.

Which king to worship?

King Herod was visibly disturbed by the question posed by the magi. After all, they hadn't traveled all that way just to see him! And there was no royal baby in his palace who would be the true King of the Jews.

No wonder, then, that he initiated an investigation so that he could ferret out the whereabouts of the child and destroy him. A consultation with the chief priests and scholars revealed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David:

Matthew 2:4-6 NIV

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah 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 shepherd my people Israel. "**

Secondly, he verified the timing of the appearance of the star, so that he could know how old the child would be. Finally, he secretly asked the magi to return after finding the child so that he, too, could come and worship him. The trap set, he sent them on their way.

And so the stage was set. Now it would be up to the magi to decide who was the true king. Which king would they honor? Which king would they obey? Which king would they worship? Would it be a baby in a little village, unrecognized by his own future subjects? Or would it be the aging tyrant who had clawed his way to the top of the pile and was still desperately trying to create the illusion that he alone was King of the Jews?

By the time Matthew wrote his gospel Herod the Great was long gone. He died just a year or two after his encounter with the magi. So why would Matthew pit Herod against the Messiah? Because Herod the Great stood for far more than a man who ruled the Jews for 33 years. He stood for all of the human systems of power and deception that conspire to rule over human beings in the place of God. From the Pharaoh of the Exodus to the king of Babylon, from the emperors of Rome who demanded that they and their dynasty be worshiped as gods, to the political and cultural structures of our day, in every case we see human beings putting themselves in the place of God and His rule.

Which king will you worship? That is the question that Matthew poses for us as we read his Christmas story. Will it be the modern-day Herods with all their pomp and power? Or will it be the Messiah, the Son of God?

A Gift Fit for a King

Finding the King:

God brought the foreign visitors all the way to the new-born King:

Matthew 2:9-10 NIV

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

Leading them in the only way that they could recognize, but in accordance with ancient Scripture, God brought the magi all the way to the doorstep of the true King of the Jews. The God of Creation and the God of the Covenant spoke in the languages of Creation and Covenant to the magi, and through them to the whole human family.

**Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.**

And their response was the same as that promised to God's children in Isaiah:

**Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;**

Gifts for a King:

The choice had been made. They had found the King of the Jews. And now they laid their gifts at his feet and bowed in worship:

Matthew 2:11-12 NIV

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

Why would people of an entirely different nationality travel at great risk across the entire Middle East to worship a Jewish king? Could it be that they saw him as far more than just the King of the Jews. After all, the star announcing His birth shined in the same night sky for all the peoples of the world.

What gift do you bring?

The story of Jesus begins with the nations bringing gifts to the world's true King. John writes in Revelation that the same thing will happen in the New Creation:

Revelation 21:22-26 NIV

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

The magi were just the first to bring their gifts to Jesus. One day people from every ethnic group will do the same. In the meantime, what about you? What gift will you bring to Him? What gift can you offer that is a gift fit for a King?