

GIFTS FIT FOR A KING

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, December 17, 2006

Matthew 2:1 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you

who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.' "

⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

Their Compelling Quest

"Where is the newborn king of the Jews?"

This question disturbed Herod deeply, as it did all of the people in Jerusalem who heard it. Its implications still disturb people today.

King? As in "Master" and "Ruler"? Who said? By what authority? Not of me! I won't have this Man to be Ruler over me.

We are so accustomed to the tales of corrupt authority. It sickens us. We become jaded, calloused, cynical.

We hear so often of inept leadership. We are wary, skeptical, distrustful.

We have learned from their example: "Promises are meant to be broken."

Where is integrity? Reliability? Courage of conviction? Consideration of others? Protection of the innocent? Care for the helpless?

Marin County may be typified by insular individualism. Leaning on others as little as possible, or not at all, Marinites pursue self-realization, self-actualization, and self-government. The dark side of this

pursuit is a self-made prison of get-off-my-back, leave-me-alone, I-don't-need-anyone and I-can't-let-anyone-know-about-this.

Jesus' birth as king—not only of Jews, as they then thought, but as it now appears, of all ethnicities—is not a threat of hostile takeover, forced labor, harsh conditions or meager wages.

Jesus is not a king who is indifferent to your needs. In fact, He said, *“Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus' kingship is all about you—*guiding* you when you are lost, *forgiving* you when you have sinned, *healing* you when you are sick, *being with you* when you are lonely, *strengthening* you when you are weak, *providing* for you when you are empty, *leading* you to find significance, *using* you to accomplish miracles.

No wonder those wise men traveled as long and as far as they did *to worship Him!*

Their Compelling Guide

They had *“seen his star in the east as it arose,”* and it had launched their unusual journey.

These men were not kings as the old Christmas carol asserts, but magi, or royal magicians. The Bible first introduces us to such gifted individuals in the book of Exodus, when Moses confronted the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and demanded that he let all the people of Israel go free to worship and serve their God. Moses authenticated his demands with God-given miracles, many of which Pharaoh's palace magicians duplicated. Magi were frequently consulted for their insight into perplexing issues and dreams. And it is generally accepted that one of their skills included observation of the stars and planets and interpretation of such signs as those in the heavens—early astrology.

But in this case, it was no simple astronomical convergence, but a traveling star that got their attention. It is often presumed that the star got their attention because of some unusual brightness, and since the natural rotation of the earth makes stars appear to travel from east to west, each evening it pointed them farther west toward Jerusalem. However, two things remain unexplained by that theory.

What linked that “bright star” to the birth of the “king of the Jews”? Beyond astrological divination, this must be traced back to the records of ancient Jewish prophecies that predicted the coming of Messiah, and indicated the general time of His arrival. I believe these men, regardless of their nationality, were faithful Jewish sages, who had risen to places of prominent service, like Joseph (under Pharaoh) and Daniel (under Nebuchadnezzar) and Nehemiah (under Artaxerxes). They were students of the prophets and watchmen of the promises of God, who counted the seventy weeks of Daniel as years, and recognized that the time for Messiah's appearing had come.

Furthermore, their “star” was not only bright enough to stand out among the thousands that were visible before electric lights lit the cities of the world at night and dimmed the skies above them, but their star *did* travel—not simply in an orbital pattern, but like a personal guide, over great distance and many months.

Matthew's Gospel records that after their interview with Herod, *“once again the star appeared to them, guiding them to Bethlehem,”* which is six miles south, *not east*, of Jerusalem. What's more, it says, *“It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.”* This hardly describes

any known astronomical movement. Stars simply do not turn south for six miles and stop over a particular home!

Finally, *“when they saw the star, they were filled with joy!”* Hardly the response you would expect if the star, like other stars, had appeared to them every night, like clockwork, for many, many months. No, this was more than “a star.” I believe this was an angelic guide, like the “stars of the morning” that were reported in the pages of the Old Testament to worship God in Heaven, and have led men and women since then in countless ways to discover God’s purposes and worship Him. It’s sudden and unexpected appearance to guide them from Herod’s palace to the child’s home prompted joyous anticipation of their journey’s pinnacle discovery.

Their Compelling Purpose

The purpose for which it led these wise men, and the conclusion of their long journey? *“We have come to worship Him.”* Worship was their objective. They were not courting political power or hoping for monetary privilege. They came to give themselves away. For that is what true worship is. Before any treasure chests were opened, *“they fell down before Him and worshiped Him.”* The gifts were only a token of their esteem.

Whom do you worship? Everyone worships something or someone. Most often it includes no outward ritual, no book, no candles, no bells, no music or singing, but something more like an inward mantra: “I am a good person. I can do this. I am successful. I’ll make it through. I am a winner. You cannot hurt me. I don’t need anyone else. I am attractive. I am a mountain. I will survive.”

We worship the Invisible God, for everything that can be seen comes from Him and is beneath Him. But, so that we may get to know Him, and understand that He knows us, He became one of us. Born a helpless infant to an ordinary family with common problems. Those wise men saw through His disguise; they knew He was more than a child. They worshiped Him who had no throne here, no privilege, no power among men. While He appeared to have nothing, they knew that He owned everything. When they could not understand His words, they knew He still possessed all wisdom and knowledge. They bowed down and worshipped him.

How do you worship? Worship is not about singing, or even serving. First and foremost, worship is bowing down. Without that inward surrender, every deed is just an act, every word only a lyric. To whom do you bow? Have you ever bowed yourself down in worship?

The worship of the magi told the real story. What they received *from Jesus* was worth more than any gift they could present to Him, more than any words they could speak about Him, more than any deed they could do for Him. The only gifts fit for this King were their surrendered and promised hearts—their very selves. “Here I am, Lord. Take me. Make me what you want me to be. Use me in ways that honor You. Send me wherever I can best serve You.”

One Solitary Life

Over two thousand years ago in an obscure village, a child was born of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village, where He worked as a carpenter until he was thirty. Then for three years He became an itinerant preacher.

This Man never went to college or seminary. He never wrote a book. He never held a public office. He never had a family nor owned a home. He never traveled even 200 miles from His birthplace. And though he never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness, throngs of people followed Him. His only credentials were His words and deeds.

While He was still young, the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His followers abandoned Him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was sentenced to death by crucifixion between two thieves. While He hung dying, His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth--the simple robe He had worn. His body was laid in a borrowed grave provided by a compassionate friend.

But three days later this Man arose from the dead--living proof that He was, as He had claimed, the Savior whom God had sent, the Son of God in human form.

Twenty centuries have come and gone and today the risen Lord Jesus Christ remains the central figure of the human race. On our calendars, His birth divides history in two. One day of every week is set aside in remembrance of Him. And our two most celebrated holidays recognize His birth and resurrection. On church buildings around the world His cross has become the symbol of victory over sin and death.

This one Man's life has furnished the theme for more songs, books, poems and paintings than any other person or event in history. Thousands of colleges, hospitals, orphanages and other social institutions have been founded in honor of this One who gave His life for us.

If we try to sum up His influence, we must conclude that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the governments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned have not changed the course of history as much as this One Solitary Life.

Wise men still seek Him. Over the centuries millions have found a new life of forgiveness from sins and peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Today He offers this life to all who will believe in Him. *"I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus said, "no one comes to the Father, except through Me." "He who hears My words, and believes on Him who sent Me, has everlasting life, and shall not be condemned; but has passed from death to life"* (John 14:6, 5:24).

Do you know Him?