

**Sermon Notes – December 27, 2020**

*“What Can We Learn From the Magi?”*

(Matthew 2:1-12)

I heard a cute story this past week about three little elderly ladies that died and went to heaven. At the gate, St. Peter asked, “What do you have to show to get into heaven?” One of the ladies was a Baptist and she said, “I have my worn Bible.” The second one was Catholic and she said, “I have my rosary beads because I pray with them.” The third lady was Methodist and she said, “Well all I have to show you is my casserole dish.” We never know what people use to get into heaven, do we?

I want to talk a few minutes today about the magi. As you know, normally Epiphany is celebrated about twelve days after Christmas. Today, we are going to do it because next week we will start on a different series of sermons. We often call the magi wise men – that they were believed to be mentally acute in the natural sciences – astronomy and the stars, medicine, and philosophy. Some scholars believe that they were priests and advisors to the Persian rulers. We really don’t know if they were from Persia or Babylon. In Daniel (in the Old Testament), it said that many seers and fortunetellers were from Babylon. We also know that the Jews were oftentimes taken into exile in Babylon. So, maybe these magi came across some of the ancient manuscripts of the Old Testament prophecies and they studied them. They read and found out that this Messiah (this ruler of Israel) was to come from the lineage of David; he would rule all the nations of the world and his kingdom would last forever. All we know is that they were seekers of truth and knowledge. They had a hunger inside and were seeking something. They were gone for days and weeks and months looking for this Christ-Child. Scholars tell us that they traveled thousands of miles to get to Bethlehem. They were probably all from different nations of the world. In fact, we think there are three wise men and ancient folklore thinks there were three wise men. But did you know that the eastern tradition churches think there were twelve wise men? We don’t really know if there were three, six, eight, or twelve. All we know is that we sing, “We Three Kings of Orient Are” and we know that they presented three gifts – gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. So we tend to think there were three, but scholars say that it could have been as many as twelve.

They were men who studied the stars - and the scripture tells us that they were led by a star to Bethlehem. They followed the star for a long time. When they got close to Jerusalem, they stopped and asked King Herod, the king of Israel, "Where do you think this Christ-Child is to be born?" King Herod calls all of his religious people (the Jews, the Pharisees, and the Elders of the law) and asks them, "Where is this child to be born?" They said, "In Bethlehem" - which was 5 or 6 miles from Jerusalem. Don't you find it really interesting that King Herod sent those wise men to Bethlehem to check out the Christ-Child when he was threatened by anybody that vied for his power? Yet, he and his soldiers and the Jewish Elders sat in Jerusalem while these wise men (magi) went off into Bethlehem to check out this child.

I want you to notice four things in this story:

1. ***That God's love and salvation is for all people because these men represented all kinds of nations of people.*** Some scholars think that one was European, one was African, and one was Asian; therefore, they were white-skinned, brown-skinned, and yellow-skinned. They represented all of the nations of the world that came to worship this child. They were Gentiles, not Jews. Here's Jesus' first visitors coming to see him and they are not Jews - they were not the Pharisees - they were Gentiles. God's love and salvation is for all people - including us (as Gentiles).
2. ***God reveals himself to those who seek Him with all their heart.*** There's a verse in Jeremiah 29:13 that says, "When you search for me, you will find me; when you seek me with all your heart." These men searched for this Christ-Child with all their heart. They spent days and months and miles traveling to find this Christ-Child. God had already created a hunger within them and they sought until they found him.

Steve May is a pastor. Before he became a pastor (in his 20s and 30s), he was working in a department store. He said there was a young guy

who worked at the store with him named Brian. Brian was about 24-years old and Steve was 30-years old. Steve was married and had children. Brian was a college-student, and he was always debating religion. He said that Brian always wanted to talk about the world's religions. He would always get into discussions with Steve because he knew Steve was a strong Christian. He wanted to debate the teachings of Buddha versus the teachings of Christ. One day Steve looked at him and he said, "Brian, before it's all over, you are going to become a follower of Jesus Christ." Brian looked at Steve and asked, "Whatever gives you that idea?" He said, "Because it's obvious that you are searching for God" - and he quoted the verse from Jeremiah 29:13 - "When you search for me, you will find me; when you seek me with all your heart." A few years later, Steve had gone onto Seminary and he was working in his first church. He got a letter from Brian that said, "Dear Steve, You were right about something. You told me that I was searching for God and one day I would find him. He found me. I am now a follower of Jesus. I'm teaching Sunday School and am a leader in my church in Phoenix, Arizona." You see, Brian was searching for God. He looked in all kinds of ways, at all the world's religions, but it was God he was seeking. "When you search for me with all your heart, you will find me." These magi searched with their hearts, and they found the Christ-Child.

3. ***God speaks to those who listen.*** Did you notice in the end of the story, it tells you that in a dream these men were warned not to go back the route of King Herod, but to go home another way? ... And they did. Isn't it interesting that they obeyed? They could've said, "Well this is just our imagination. We were just dreaming that. There's nothing to it." But they chose to believe that God was speaking to them in dreams. If you remember in the Old Testament scriptures, you know that God often spoke in dreams to the prophets - like Daniel, Isaiah, Micah, etc. He spoke to them often through dreams and gave them messages for the Israelites. Here, God spoke to these wise men in a dream. *God speaks to us today, but sometimes he does it through the scripture. Sometimes He does it through music or nature. Sometimes He does it through the circumstances and experiences in our lives. Sometimes He speaks to*

*you and me through somebody else – a brother or sister in Christ – or maybe even a stranger. But God speaks to us, if we listen.*

4. ***God leads those who follow Him – who are willing to be led.*** Have you ever met people at work or at school who are not willing to be led? You try to help them and do the best you can, but they're not willing to be led. *God will lead anyone who is willing to seek His advice and guidance and follow Him and his teachings.* These men followed a star and it led them to the Christ-Child. Now, I believe what the scripture says about, "Nothing is impossible with God." If God could create a child in Mary, if He could lead the Israelites by a pillow of cloud by day and a pillow of fire by night, could He not lead these men by a star? I believe He can. God will lead us too, if we're willing to seek His advice. God will lead us, if we'll let Him.

I want you to notice something else about these guys. One is that they found the Christ-Child and they fell down and worshipped him. They bowed down in reverence and awe because he was the Royal King – he was the Christ-Child – the Son of God. They bowed down and then they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The Old Testament would say that these men were Arabs, and that Arabs often presented gifts to people as an expression of their feelings. But they also presented gifts to anyone who they thought was royalty. So, did these magi give these gifts to Jesus because they thought he was a royal king or did they present them as symbols of who Christ was going to be – his identity? Gold is a gift for a king. Jesus was the king. Frankincense was a certain incense that was used by priests in the temple. Priests were believed to be mediators between God and man. So, Jesus would be our priest – in between us and God. Myrrh was a perfume or spice used to prepare a body for burial; that gift would represent Jesus being the suffering servant. Myrrh was also used, if you remember, when Jesus was on the cross, the soldiers mixed it with wine and gave it to Jesus to drink – but He didn't drink it. Do you remember that myrrh was used by Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and Mary and the women when they went to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial? Myrrh was expensive but it was something used in preparing a body for burial. So, were these gifts used to identify who Christ was? He is our King, our priest and our

suffering servant – our Savior who died on the cross for us – who would die, be buried, and resurrected. We don't know, but they gave Christ their best gifts -- because gold, frankincense, and myrrh were extremely expensive!

I want to ask you something... as we prepare for a new year, do we give God our best gifts when we worship Him? Do we realize that God gave us the best gift, His Son, and He loved us so much that He gave His life for us? Do we give Him our left-overs or do we give Him the best – whether it be our time, our talents, or our money? If God were to ask you or me, “Is your relationship to me a priority?” – How would we answer God? Would He know by the time we give, by the service we render to others, by the substance of our life resources and most of all by our hearts?” Do we give Him our love, our faithfulness, our loyalty? Do we give of our best to the Christ-Child, God?

I want you to notice one other thing in that story... It said those men were warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod, but to go another way. I believe God did something in their hearts and minds. When they saw that child, it transformed them. They listened to God and went a different direction home. When we truly experience Christ in our hearts and minds, it changes our lives, our attitudes, the way we think, the way we do things – and we will go in a different way because we know Christ.

What does the story of the magi tell us? God loves you and me. He cares for all people – including us Gentiles. The Jews were not God's only chosen people. We are too. It says that God reveals himself to anybody that seeks him with all their heart. God still speaks to us today in lots of different ways. But the question is, are we listening? God will lead those who will follow or are willing to be led. God wants us to worship Him and give Him our best – our time, our talents, our monies – but most of all, our heart, our love, our devotion, our reverence, our respect – our all to Him. When we follow Christ, he will lead us in a different way – in our thinking, our attitudes, and our actions. May we worship the Christ-Child this Christmas and this New Year. Amen.