



Sunday January 7, 2024
Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany Sunday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

A few days after Christmas my son Kai and I planned to meet his godfather at a local restaurant for lunch. Like many others throughout the Christmas season we planned a get together so we could catch up. We arrived a few minutes early, found a great seat by a window, and a few minutes later Kai's godfather arrived carrying a beautifully wrapped gift under his arm. We stood up to greet each other and then we sat down to order. Small talk filled the time as we waited for our food to arrive and once it did we ate and talked and laughed as the three of us caught up with one another. When we finished eating, Kai's godfather asked him if he would like to open his present. Initially, Kai said that he wanted to wait until he got home, but anyone who has ever known a 9 year old knows *that* level of patience is short-lived and before we knew it we were in the middle of an unwrapping frenzy. Ripping and tearing, paper flying here and there and when the last of the wrapping paper had been dispensed of – my son just sat there with a look of surprise at what he was seeing. As he sat there holding the small box before him; his eyes revealing his complete shock, he softly said to his godfather, “*gee, thanks for the coffee pot!*” The 9 year old's confused and disappointed response to receiving an elegant, stainless steel coffee carafe was met a moment later with his godfather responding, “*silly boy you have to open the box!*” When Kai finally opened the box revealing a gift card and gift certificate for a day of fun with his godfather that included going to one of his favorite restaurants, this boy was on cloud nine – ready to spend his gift card and schedule his fun day with his godfather. I'm sure most of us have heard similar stories from family and friends of gift giving surprises gone wrong, and this one reminded me that often in this season of giving, we tend to focus on the extravagant, or at least frivolous, rather than the practical. Because many of us look at it as an opportunity to indulge – to give something to someone that they wouldn't necessarily buy for themselves – okay maybe not a stainless steel coffee carafe to a 9 year old, but at its best, to let our loved ones feel seen and understood through the thoughtfulness honored in our gift giving. Officially, the season of Christmas ended yesterday. During the Christmas season, the church celebrates Emmanuel – God with Us. And yet, in the midst of our modern culture many of us celebrate an excess of giving and receiving. And although there's no biblical basis connecting Santa Claus, Secret Santa's, or White Elephant Exchanges to the season of Christmas, gifts *do* show up in Epiphany. During Epiphany we celebrate the revelation of Jesus, and it all begins with a star that guides the wisemen – the first outside of Jesus' own family to understand the importance of his birth. I'm pretty sure you've all seen the Christmas image of the wisemen travelling by camel through a star lit night. One star dominates the sky as they arrive on the crest of the hill overlooking Bethlehem. The journey is almost over. It's been a long trip from a country far away in the east. There have been dangers along the way and now they are at the town of Jesus' birth. The wisemen look down from the star in the sky to the building lying below its light. This is where they will find the new born king that they had read about in the Scriptures. This picture of the wisemen is popular on Christmas Cards, and in our nativity scenes and Christmas plays. Many even place the wisemen around the manger with the shepherds who have come to the stable to see the baby boy. But despite what many of us may have seen in children's Christmas pageants, Christmas movies, or read in our favorite retelling of the Christmas story, I think most of us are aware that these wisemen don't really belong in the manger scene. There are numerous indications that suggest that they arrived quite sometime after Jesus' birth in a stable. According to Matthew, the wisemen arrive in Jerusalem, the largest neighboring town to Bethlehem, and when they finally arrive at the house they find “*the child and Mary his mother.*” And although Matthew uses a number of terms to refer to Jesus, he never uses the Greek word for infant, and when the wisemen finally meet Jesus, Matthew uses the term most often attributed to young children. Finally, the wisemen have been assigned many roles, from kings, or sorcerers, to astronomers, or wise men from the East but it's worth noting that the Bible never states how many of them there were, what their names were, where they came from *exactly*, and how far they traveled to follow the star. What we do know is that they studied the stars and were familiar with the Hebrew scriptures, but Matthew doesn't give us too many other details. We can also assume that they most likely came from affluence based on their gifts. So let's take a little time to explore those gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Strange gifts for a newborn don't you think? There's a popular meme circulating the internet and social media suggesting if there had been “Three Wise Women” instead of “Three Wise Men,” “they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts like diapers, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and there would be peace on earth.” And all of this has me thinking about the gifts that we give.



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There have been many interpretations of the gifts that the wisemen brought to Jesus with some reasoning that they're symbols of who this baby was, but Matthew doesn't give us any explanation why they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew simply gives us the facts. *"They knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him."* To us these might seem like useless gifts, but *what do you* give this child who is the all-powerful God? When the Lord of the universe comes down from heaven, to be with us in the flesh, as one of us – a baby who has come to do battle with Herod and all the evil of this world – *what do you give?* When we consider the greatness of the gift that we've been given in Jesus... *what can we really give in return?* And when we think about it like this then it seems like my tiny offering or yearly pledge is puny and pointless. Even the wisemen with their precious gifts must have realized that their expensive presents were hardly adequate for the child in the manger – the God who has become a human and now rests in his mother's arms. *But maybe that's the point.* We, like the wisemen, are simply blown away by the awesomeness of God's love that led him to come to us as a little child. We fall to our knees and fumble around for a gift worthy of such a gift. When God's gift to us is just too great, too wondrous for us to find a gift worthy enough – what can we give in return? Like those men from the east, all we can do is offer our humble gifts – yet at the same time, the very best we can offer – a bag of gold, the fragrant perfume of frankincense, and the sacred oil of myrrh. And maybe that's always the way it is with *our* gifts to God. All the gifts that we offer in worship - our praise, our music and singing, the words of our liturgy, our bowing and kneeling, the words we whisper in prayer, this church building – the bricks, the glass, the concrete and wood, the money we drop on the offering plate – just gold, frankincense, and myrrh – small gifts in comparison to God's goodness and love toward us. All we can do is offer God the best of what we have at the moment. This reminds me of the time when a woman comes to Jesus and extravagantly pours an entire bottle of expensive perfume over Jesus' feet. Jesus is about to make a really extravagant gift on the cross, and he accepts the woman's extravagant gift. The woman expressed her love for Jesus in an unreserved and unrestrained way – she gave the best of what she had. Similarly, the wisemen do the same. They were in the presence of God who had chosen to reveal himself in a human child and they opened their boxes and emptied them, giving over everything they had. The best gifts that we can offer Jesus are the gifts of ourselves. In reality, the gold, frankincense and myrrh of the wisemen are trivial and really quite useless for the God of all creation and the savior of all people. But as useless as these gifts are for God, they're a sign of the way the wisemen gave of themselves. What we give to Jesus may seem so trivial and modest and poor, but if they're representative of the giving of ourselves to God, then this is our most important gift. And while this may still be small in comparison to what God has given us, it nevertheless is the very best we can give. A few of days ago we celebrated the beginning of a new year. As the old year ends and a new year begins many people reassess where their life is heading, and they make a new year's resolution or a promise to themselves that things will be different in the coming year. This might take the form of looking for a new job, seeking to improve relationships, or determining to take a new direction. This is the first Sunday in the New Year and now after having heard about the gifts of the wisemen, I wonder if this would be a good time for us to take another look at our response to the God who was born in a bed of hay just for us. And I'm not just talking about what we give in the offering plate, even though that's a part of it. I'm asking, how well have we given ourselves to God in response to his wonderful gift to us? How readily and regularly have we spent time with God in worship, in prayer, in reading and dwelling in his Word? How well have we given of ourselves and our time to someone who needs love and compassion? How well have we shown that this king rules in our lives by letting him make a difference when we're confused or lonely or devastated by what life throws at us? My friends, how well have we used our gifts to do the work God is calling us to do? How well have we given God, not second best, not what's simply *'good enough'*, but the very best of what we have to offer? The wisemen went home by another road, and we too can walk a different road this year, a road where we can make the king of kings the living and active center of everything we say and do. The challenge before each of us is to make each breathing moment a gift worth giving to the King. God gave himself to us because he loves us. So, may his love be reflected in our lives as we worship him with all that we have. That's our gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Thanks be to God! Amen.