

## Written in the Star

Epiphany

Ps 72: 1-7, 10-14, Mt 2: 1-12

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*Ps 72: 1-7, 10-14*

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Mt 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Who were these mysterious Magi, these 3 Wise Men, whom traditions have come to call kings and have named Casper, Balthazar and Melchior? They are a part of every crèche and Christmas pageant, but their story confounds us, and their presence confuses us. We do not know quite what to make of these mysterious kings from the East. They wore royal robes and carried expensive, exotic gifts for an infant born of peasant parents in a stable.

Today the Magi are even joked about: “What would have happened if it had been 3 wise women instead of 3 wise men who visited Jesus? They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts.”

Humor is the way to make the absurd obvious as it pokes fun at the impracticality of the gifts. After all, the gifts which were presented to Jesus certainly do seem odd. What use does a baby have with gold, frankincense and myrrh?

But just as the Messiah has come to the world unexpectedly as an infant, as a messenger, of God’s love so entwined with humanity, there is an unexpected purpose to the gifts of the Magi. The gifts and the worship of the child Jesus were *not* about being practical. *They were glimpses of God revealed in each gift as each gift makes known something of Jesus’ identity and purpose.*

Why would these strangers do this? There was no way that Jesus and his family could ever repay the debt of gratitude they would incur by accepting such generous presents. They could not give anything in return. There would be no exchange of gifts.

What must have Mary and Joseph thought? They were Jews, marginalized and poor, oppressed subjects of the Roman Empire. The whole reason they were in a stable in the first place is that authorities forced the young, expectant couple to leave their home as a taxation decree had gone out. People like Mary and Joseph not only did not receive gifts from kings, they had probably never even seen a king.

Indeed, all they knew was that *kings took from poor people like them* — their freedom, hope, dignity, livelihood, income and land. Honestly, the whole business of gifts from the Magi must have confused them and scared them too. We can wonder whether or not they even wanted to accept these incredible, expensive, regal gifts for fear that there were strings attached.

The story of the three kings is not just a pretty tale, it is a pretty radical — and even political one. In the ancient world, gifts were rarely exchanged between people of unequal status. In the rare times it happened, such gifts came with burdensome political expectations.

Peasants might offer a gift to a king to demonstrate allegiance, request a favor or plead for mercy.

In the highly unlikely circumstance that a ruler gave a gift to a peasant, the recipient was expected to give something back as a debt of gratitude. Gifts were used to secure power and privilege for benefactors, the very definition of *quid pro quo*.

But when the three kings brought gifts to Jesus, they turned gift-giving upside down and inside out. Mary and Joseph did not have any gifts; they were neither pleading nor making good with Caesar, Herod or some rival ruler.

The true gift of these lavish gifts is that the Wise Men brought them with no expectation of repayment, with no debt of gratitude attached. For the baby Messiah, the gifts were freely given and received in response to love, not in anticipation of reciprocity. Obligation was gone, replaced by astonishment. Repayment is neither possible nor necessary.

What happened when the Wise Men followed the Bethlehem Star to offer gifts and praise was a fulfillment of the psalmist’s prayer for the king, “May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor. . . . May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy.”

The Magi were men of great faith, using and giving their own gifts of religion and astrology to interpret the meaning of the Bethlehem star, knowing that it would lead them to the

long-awaited Messiah. They were wise enough to follow a star, and did not consider themselves too intelligent, too powerful, too wealthy, to kneel to a poor child in a manger. All they needed to know was written in a star.

And the gifts, the costly, impractical gifts of the Wise Men, the Magi, the kings, name for us the divine royalty of the One born in the humble stable.

*Gold* is the gift to present to a king, which names Jesus' identity as the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed king. *Frankincense* is a spice needed for priestly duties so is a fitting offering to God which recognizes Jesus' divine nature. Lastly, *myrrh* was used in the embalming process of the deceased, which points to Jesus' future, his death on the cross. We carol this faithful reality each time we rise to sing 'We Three Kings: "Glorious now behold him arise; Christ and God and Sacrifice....."'

The Wise Men saw the divinity, the identity, and the purpose in the child asleep on the hay.

When we too to see the cross in the manger, when the radical purpose and religious meaning of the gifts of the three Wise Men kindle an epiphany- an enlightening realization- within us, when we offer our own spiritual gold, frankincense, and myrrh, then Christmas is now and Christ is born into the everyday present. The Christmas story must fill hearts with the surprise of tenderness, the warmth of genuine gratitude and the passion for real justice. We too treasure the gift of Christ that we cannot repay, but instead share our gifts for those oppressed by the Herods of today.

We kneel to the Christ child and offer freedom, hope, and dignity. Amen.