

## “Bearing Gifts – Not Just For Wise Men”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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As we begin this Epiphany Sunday’s consideration of the Magi... 3 ‘Wise Guys,’ if you will... I would offer to you a riddle from THIS ‘wise guy’: ‘what do you call **two** very **independent physicians** who **join together** in **medical practice**? A ‘**paradox!**’ (as in, a ‘pair-o’-docs’☺) NOW, who says I don’t put a lot of ‘deep thought’ into my Sunday messages? (OK, maybe it IS time for a little vacation...)

So what does this corny joke have to do with today’s consideration of Scripture. (Besides, my effort to make each Lord’s Day a ‘Pun-day Sunday?’) Well, as I thought about the ‘stars’ of this annual observance of Epiphany... the 3 Magi/Wise Men/Kings (of course, they really WEREN’T ‘kings’ at all... that would be Herod’s job)... it occurred to me what a ‘paradox’ their story is.

Think about it. So, these 3 ‘gift-bearers’ from the East are as integral a part of the Christmas story as ‘shepherds’ and ‘angels,’ right? Any depiction of the Birth of the Messiah, the Baby Jesus, is not complete without those 3 ornately-dressed camel-riders as part of the picture... be it in a story book or manger scene. And what was the vocation of these important players in the Birth Narrative of the Son of God? Prophets? High Priests? ‘Seminary Professors?’ NO. **Astrologers**. Practitioners of **magic**. That term ‘Magi’ comes from “*Magos*,” Greek for ‘magician,’ or ‘sorcerer.’ Illusionist or fortune teller. Maybe like ‘Penn and Teller?’ (No, probably not... at least one of those is an avowed atheist). REGARDLESS, doesn’t it seem just a bit ‘paradoxical’ to use words like ‘astrologers,’ ‘magicians,’ ‘sorcerers,’ ‘illusionist’ or ‘fortune tellers’ so closely with the most central figure in the **Christian** faith, the very Son of the One True God of Israel, **Jesus Christ**?

As some of you may know, there IS a little bit more than meets the eye in describing the ‘Magi’ simply as ‘magicians’ or ‘astrologers.’ These ‘watchers of the sky’ were believed to indeed be ‘priests’ themselves... not of **Judaism**, but rather, “**Zoroastrianism**.” (Try saying THAT 3 times fast!) ‘Zo-roast-rianism’ is one of the world’s oldest, still-practicing religions, having been established in the area of Persia/Iran somewhere about 2000 years B.C. (‘Before CHRIST.’ ☺)

Interestingly, there are some characteristics of this religion that might sound a little familiar. Zoroastrianism is **Monotheistic** (a single creator god). Ultimate **destruction** of **evil**. **Judgment** after **death**. **Free will**. AND, perhaps most significantly, believes in a **Messiah** who will act as a **savior** to the people. Because of these similarities, these 'priests from the east' no doubt felt a kinship with their Jewish brethren, and were familiar enough with their prophecies to know that this 'mobile, agile' luminary in the skies was no mere 'shooting star.' But the 'harbinger of truth'... as in the Messiah. ***"The way, the truth, the life."*** The Christ foretold by Jewish prophets was not too unlike their own belief in a coming Savior. Therefore, they felt drawn to go and search for this 'Promised One.'

And not only must they 'go to pay homage,' but they must NOT arrive empty-handed. So, of course, they brought very costly gifts. **Gold, frankincense, and myrrh**. Each of these had special significance. **Gold** represents **Kingship**. The only gift worthy to give one of such high status... at least, from an *eternal* standpoint. **Frankincense** was used in **worship** to an almighty **God**. **Myrrh** was an **embalming oil** used upon the occasion of **death**. The hymn we opened worship with put this all together quite nicely: *"Glorious now behold Him arise – KING... and GOD... and SACRIFICE."*

So what do we have to learn from these 3 guys who so much had their 'heads in the clouds?' You and I have a hard enough time just putting one foot in front of the other, looking *down* in order to make sure we don't trip over something right in front of us... let alone look up into the skies. Well, for one, just as God used an unlikely trio of 'star gazers' to emphasize the importance of this Christ Child, how much more can God use YOU and ME?! As I said, these 'magicians' are an inextricable part of the beginning of Jesus' life on earth. Just as YOU are an 'inextricable' part of Jesus' life on earth TODAY! In going back to that '**paradox**' word, it can be defined as **\*\*"one having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases."** I don't know about you, but there have been 'phases' of my life... and certainly 'qualities'... that have been 'contradictory' to the Christian faith. And yet, God has still been able to use my 'paradoxical' life. As He has, and will continue to, USE YOURS!

Also, those Magi were drawn to the very side of the newborn King not because of their differences, but because of their similarities. They came not because they belonged to

the same 'holy huddle,' the same 'denomination,' but because of what they shared in common. As you and I seek to engage those with whom we might have 'differences' in faith backgrounds... or LACK of faith background... be much more mindful of what you may share in COMMON. Going back to that likely tradition of the Magi, there is much common ground to be shared with those who believe in **One God, a single Creator**, whose ultimate goal is to **conquer evil** (No matter our religious 'affiliation,' I think we could agree on the prevalence of evil in our world). I would say that there can be pretty widespread agreement for a God who doesn't control us like a puppet on a string, but gives us **free will** to exercise... for better or worse; and, a God who loves His creation enough to send a **Savior** to deliver us from death. Emphasizing to another what you share in common can work 'magic' in any relationship...

As much as dealing with the anxiety of how God could use lives as 'paradoxical' as ours... or how we overcome objections to our faith by building common ground with others... what I want to most challenge you with is **'How are YOU 'bearing gifts' in Christ's name?'** Do you expect someone else to be your 'magi,' bringing gifts to God on your behalf? Or, have you accepted the challenge to be a 'wise man' (or woman) to 'traverse afar' in bearing witness to the Messiah?

You may have doubt as to what 'gifts' you have to offer. 'I'm too old. I don't have resources like others do. I have too many challenges to overcome. So does my church. Is there really hope for the future?'

These were likely some of the same arguments that the people of Isaiah's time had. Much of his prophetic words were written in times of exile, away from their 'promised land,' in fear of what was to happen to them in adverse conditions. And yet, he could write of **restoration... of a future... of HOPE**. In the words of the Reformation Bible Commentary, Isaiah "called the Godly to **persevere in seeking the Lord... in experiencing God's peace during times of trouble... and in responding to God's new acts of redemption in faith.** ... Isaiah **promised that a remnant would survive the exile.**"

The prophet's words are JUST as meaningful for us TODAY as they were back then. Though this church may be a 'remnant' of what it once was, we can believe in God's promise to

survive... and indeed, to THRIVE! God has called the 'Godly'... YOU and ME... to **persevere** in **seeking the Lord**. To **respond** to **God's NEW ACTS** of redemption in **FAITH**. As we **respond**... as we **persevere**... we WILL '**experience God's peace during times of trouble**'...

As those 'travelers from the east' 'responded'... 'persevered'... 'experienced God's peace'... as they followed the Light in the darkness... so too may we. In this New Year of 2019, may our overriding **resolution**... much more important than LOSING weight or being better 'organized'... may we GAIN a stronger relationship with God by being better 'spiritualized'... in **worship**, in **study**, in **prayer**, in **reaching out to others**. Don't hide God's love for you under a bushel basket... but on a stand for all to see. As you and I 'resolve' to more faithfully 'follow the Light in the darkness,' may we remember those words of Isaiah:

***"Arise, shine; for your light has come...the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.***

***...the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.***

***Lift up your eyes and look around... they come to you;***

***...your heart shall thrill and rejoice (be enlarged)...***

***Proclaim the praise of the Lord." (Isaiah 60:1-6, selected verses)***

May you and I take the ancient words of the prophet to heart: **"Arise, shine... for your light has come. The LORD will arise upon you ... his glory will appear over you."** Your friends, your family, your co-workers... **'They come to you!'** And so, let us **"Proclaim the praise of the Lord!"** With 'thrilled' and 'enlarged' hearts, may all of God's children said... 'AMEN!'