

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**The Epiphany of Our Lord (Observed) – January 5, 2024**  
**Matthew 2:1-12 – Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Everyone loves the story of the Magi. It's a wonderful crowning jewel of the Christmas story. What a perfect touch, that no one recognized the humble Christ child, no one even noticed the star announcing his birth, until these wise men came from afar to worship him.

So we love to decorate our Christmas cards with paintings of the star of Bethlehem, and silhouettes of the three kings on camels crossing the desert. But we have to be careful not to go too far, not to miss the point and reduce it all to just a cute fairy tale.

Because the story of the wise men is included in Matthew's gospel for one primary purpose: To show us who Jesus is and what he came to do. To reveal Jesus as our true King and God, born to die for the sins of the world.

And unbelievers don't want to talk about that. The world always avoids uncomfortable carols about the nails and spear which will pierce him through, the cross be borne for me for you. It prefers to trivialize the wise men and sing sentimental songs instead about a little drummer boy and three ships come sailing in, songs that say nothing whatsoever about the Lord Jesus Christ.

I mean, the little drummer boy isn't about Jesus at all! It's only about this cute boy who never existed, and how he played his best for Jesus.

Or even worse, there's the song about the friendly beasts, the donkey and the cow and the sheep and the dove, and their gifts they brought to Jesus. The donkey carried Mary, the cow offered its manger, the sheep provided wool for a blanket, and the dove sang to comfort him. This is awful. It tells us nothing about who Jesus is and what he came to do. It's mere sentimentality.

At least the song *We Three Kings* gets it right. Because at least it explains the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh: that these gifts to reveal Jesus, our King and God and sacrifice.

For gold is to honor him as King of kings, like gold in a crown. "Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again, King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign."

And frankincense is to worship him as our God, like incense offered to God in the temple, "Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a Deity nigh; prayer and praising, voices raising, worshipping God on high."

And myrrh, the third and strangest gift, acknowledges why Jesus came. He came to die on the cross for the sins of the world. "Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb."

*We Three Kings* gets it right, because it takes its cue from the prophecy of Isaiah 60, the prophecy of Epiphany: "The wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord." Not gold and frankincense and myrrh. But gold and frankincense and good news.

Because myrrh is good news. Myrrh is the best of news. It's gospel for all the world. For myrrh is an embalming spice, a burial spice. Bringing him myrrh means that this king, this God incarnate, he is born to die on behalf of all the sinners of the world.

Therefore myrrh will be mentioned again, on Good Friday, when they take down the body of Jesus from the cross and bind him in linen cloths with a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds in weight. And that is certainly good news.

For the sacrificial death of this child brings salvation to all mankind, payment for the penalty of sin, redemption, light in despair, glory in the shadow of darkness, hope for all the earth.

And in him, in this child who was wrapped in swaddling cloths at his birth, who will be wrapped in linen with myrrh and aloes at his death, in him all the world has joy and salvation, deliverance from death. In him all the earth sings the praises of the Lord.

So unlike the gifts of the drummer boy or the friendly animals, the gifts of the Magi are not focused on the Magi at all. Their gifts are all about Jesus, who he is and what he came to do.

And that is the point of Epiphany. Epiphany is not about us and what we do for God. Epiphany reveals Jesus, his identity and his purpose, what he does for us.

It's even there in the name. The word Epiphany means, "shining upon". Like the star, shining upon Bethlehem, pointing the wise men to the Christ child, leading them to Jesus.

So in Epiphany, the light of revelation shines upon Jesus, to reveal this mysterious baby. It reveals him: the true King of kings, Light of Light, very God of very God, who comes to offer his own body and blood in exchange for sinners, to die for the sins of the world.

Epiphany brings to light the plan of the deep mystery of the ages, that this child is born to die. The most glorious gift of God, the gift of perfect good news, is his death for us on Good Friday.

Last week, the old man Simeon was the first to see him, in the temple. He saw the glory of the Lord, the light of God's salvation, prepared in the presence of all peoples, the light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to his people Israel.

And now today, the light of the star shines upon him, the king of the Jews. And wise men from afar come to worship him, because he is born not just for the Jews, but for all nations.

What a contrast between the Magi and wicked King Herod. Herod is filled with jealousy, only focused on himself, afraid someone will try to take away his throne. Blinded by unbelief, Herod cannot comprehend that the newborn king has no interest in overthrowing an earthly kingdom. Herod cannot see that Christ's kingdom is not of this world, that he is born to reign eternally, in a far higher and better kingdom, to draw all nations to himself.

So Herod only seeks to worship this baby as a pretense for murder. But the Magi worship him in truth, as their holy king. And they rejoice to learn from the prophecy of Micah that out of Bethlehem shall come a ruler to shepherd Israel. So they go to Bethlehem and search diligently, and when they see the star rising again before them, they rejoice exceedingly with great joy.

And so at last, after a two-year journey, the Magi come to the house, and they see the child with Mary his mother, and they fall down and worship him.

They worship him, for this Jesus is their king, yet far more than a King. He is God in the flesh, God with us, Immanuel.

Worship is reserved for God alone. As the psalms declare, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness. Tremble before him, all the earth! Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name."

For this Jesus is the Lord, our Maker. As it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." And so they worship. And opening their treasures, the wise men offer him gifts: gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

None of us can bring him such costly gifts. We do not have gold and frankincense and myrrh to offer. We have no great wisdom to read the signs of the stars, or understand the prophecies of Scripture, or perceive by the heavens that Jesus is our true king and God.

We can only come before him, emptyhanded, poor sinners, by faith. So come in joy and thanksgiving, to worship our Savior, born as our perfect sacrifice, to redeem us from our sins.

Come receive this King, and the gifts he offers, far better than any gift you can offer him. Receive his gifts that he offers you in the church, the free gifts of his word and sacrament. Listen carefully to his word, to the preaching and teaching offered to you here. Study the Scriptures and search them for the truth revealed about Jesus. And receive his sacraments, forgiveness in his body and blood. Receive all these wonderful gifts of Jesus in holy joy.

And worship your King. This is your light, and your glory. The glory of God is to come as your servant, to give himself for you, a pleasing sacrifice, an offering to God for the life of the world.

And by his triumph on the cross, he will crush his foes under his feet and destroy the powers of darkness and rule the nations with a rod of iron, so every knee will bow before him in worship, and all kings come cringing to him. Kiss the Son lest he be angry, and you perish, for this is the mighty Lord, the God of gods, the shepherd of his people, ruler of heaven and earth.

Worship and praise him for his incarnation, his death, and glorious resurrection. And let every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.