

I. Intro. Even though you may have thought Christmas is over, welcome back to a very familiar story

A. We all know it very well, or at least we think we do

1. Many of us grew up with Christmas pageants, children's programs and nativity scenes that all had three wise men gathering around Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus

a) We are familiar with bathrobes, paper Burger King crowns, and fake plastic jewelry boxes

b) We remember starting to sing "We three kings of Orient are" and then stopping because we couldn't recall anything beyond the 1st verse

2. And then there are those famous gifts: "gold, frankincense, and myrrh"

...

a) It's a phrase that practically rolls off our tongues ... every child knows those three gifts:

b) *Marcia Garland tells how the story of baby Jesus is a favorite with her four-year-old daughter, who has much of it memorized. One day Marcia's husband was quizzing the little girl on her colors. He pulled out a silver crayon and asked her its name. "Gold," she replied. "No, not gold," he said. "Guess again." The girl paused for a moment, and then triumphantly cried out, "Frankincense!"*

B. There are lots of Christian traditions surrounding this story:

1. For example, historically, we have talked about there being *three* men who came ... after all, they brought three gifts!

2. And for over a thousand years, we have called them *kings* ... In our books, paintings, films, and dramas we have depicted them as kings journeying to visit a newborn king

a) This has drawn from Isaiah 60.3 we heard today where it says that kings will be drawn to Jerusalem's bright dawn

b) The idea of three kings coming to Jesus' birth also draws from how people have interpreted words in Psalm 72, where it says, "may all kings fall down before him" and it mentions kings from distant lands bringing gifts

3. And then we even have traditions for the names of these three kings. In Western Christianity, they are known as:

a) Melchior, who came from Persia

b) Caspar, from India

c) And Balthazar, from Arabia ... all of which are places "to the east"

C. Unfortunately, these traditions have no clear basis in Scripture

1. The Bible does not say that three men came from the East. It doesn't give us a number

2. The story of Jesus' birth in book of Matthew also does not call them kings ... they are called magi/wise men ...
 - a) they were probably elite astrologers and possibly followers of the Zoroastrian religion
 - b) They were certainly not Jewish, and probably not royalty
3. Finally, we do not know their names with certainty, nor exactly where "in the East" they came from

II. So I'd like to reexamine message of the wise men and their gifts

A. When I call into question the various traditions surrounding the magi, it's not for the purpose of saying that the biblical Christmas story is a total fabrication

1. I still believe that some wise men came from the East with gifts for the young Christ child ...
2. but I do not need to know or prove exactly how many of them came, where they came from, or how old Jesus was when they arrived
3. These are scientific questions which cannot be scientifically proven ... but the questions do not undermine my belief in the basic truth of a visit to the baby Jesus by foreign dignitaries who somehow recognized the importance of his birth and brought gifts to honor him

B. Behind all these interesting traditions, for most of us **there was one underlying message we learned as children re the "three kings"**:

1. Last week Cindy named the "Sunday school answers" many of us learned growing up, when "Jesus" was the answer we gave to almost every question we were asked
2. Well, if you were asked, "Why do we give presents to each other at Christmas?" what would you say?
 - a) The Sunday school answer most of us learned is to say, "because the wise men brought gifts to the baby Jesus"
 - b) This message is so basic and Christmas gift giving has gone on for so many centuries that we take it for granted

C. At its face value, this message is true

1. Our Christmas gift giving owes partly to the biblical story of the magi, and partly to the legends growing out of a compassionate gift-giving fourth-century bishop now called St. Nicholas.
2. The only thing wrong I see with this Sunday school answer is that it focuses only on the gifts in the treasure boxes
 - a) I'm concerned that this rationale for our gift giving draws too much attention to material gifts ... *what's wrong with the Sunday school message is that it assumes these are the **only** gifts the wise men gave*

b) What if we looked beyond gold, frankincense, and myrrh? What if we examined some other gifts the wise men brought to Jesus ... gifts that are more relevant to us today than frankincense and myrrh? (*After all, how many of you have actually used frankincense or myrrh any time in the last year?*)

III. Three more gifts the wise men gave ... gifts we may find much costlier than gold, frankincense, and myrrh ... (thanks to writer Carol Noren for this idea of these three additional gifts)

A. Gift of time

1. One reason we celebrate the gifts of the Magi 12 days after Christmas is because it took time for the wise men to make their journey

- a) They first observed the star ... then made their preparations for a long trip, figuring out the best route across some rugged and desolate places
- b) Then there was the time it took to actually travel hundreds of miles with a caravan of camels and servants, first going to Jerusalem and meeting with Herod before finally arriving in Bethlehem
- c) It was a huge investment of time, probably months away from home

2. In that first Christmas, I sometimes wonder what prompted Mary and Joseph to open up their temporary quarters and receive some total strangers to see their little baby.

- a) It's tempting for us to think that Mary and Joseph would have welcomed these dignitaries because they were obviously wealthy and brought gold
- b) But it wasn't the economic value of their gifts that got them into the presence of baby Jesus

After all, we don't know that the humble shepherds brought any gifts w/ them, but they still got to see the baby

The customs of ancient hospitality dictated that you graciously receive anyone who has given time and effort to come and visit you

The wise men were granted an audience with the new king because of the time and effort they gave to come to him

c) *The same is true for us today*

We cannot buy our way into the good graces of the Lord Jesus Christ ... but if we invest our time to seek his presence (here in this building, and in our homes and workplaces), he will be there for us

3. Our work, school and home commitments seem to be demanding ever more of our time, but we're all given the same 24 hours/day

- a) This first Sunday of a new year makes us very aware of the passage of time: We're another year older ... Are we another year wiser? Are we another year closer to Jesus?

- b) The time that the magi took to journey toward King Jesus begs a question from all of us ... (Humor me for a moment ...)
- c) I hope you would agree with me in declaring that the following three statements are true:
 - 1) We are disciples who name Jesus Christ as Lord over our whole lives ... 2) all resources come from God ... and 3) time seems to be our most precious resource
- d) If these statements are true, then the example of the time the wise men committed to pursuing Jesus causes me to ask, "*Does our usage of time reflect that Jesus is Lord of our lives? Does it align itself with God's purposes in this world?*"

B. Gift of risk

1. Easy for us in northern Indiana in the 21st century to forget that travel in the ancient world was a risky thing
 - a) Robbers and slave traders stalked the highways
 - b) Vast open spaces w/ no one nearby to lend help in emergencies ... no convenience store around the corner if supplies ran out ... no cell phones
2. Wise men not only took risks w/ their own physical security to visit the Christ child ... there was a gift of psychological security they also gave up: their *anonymity*
 - a) To find the infant king, they had to ask directions, make their presence known and give up being self-sufficient loners
 - b) By inquiring in Herod's courts, they risked being pursued by Herod's goon squads if they failed to report back
 - c) They risked their safe anonymity in a foreign land, in order to find the Christ child
3. Taking risks ... now this is probably for me the most difficult of these three additional gifts
 - a) Although I've learned to step into leadership, my own personality tends to avoid risks and play it safe when I have the option of taking the easier way out

This past week I was twice presented with opportunities to take a risk with someone in need ... once I plunged ahead into the risk and once I played it safe and shrank back

On Friday when Lyle and I were here but our office manager was gone for lunch, a man using a walker came in asking for some money to put gas in his car to get home. Don Garber usually fields these requests and Lyle and I were busy. I didn't know of any cash or gas cards available from the church, so we told him to come back later when Don was here, but he didn't.

On his way out he asked if either of us could personally help ... Again, I turned him down and in the back of my mind I knew I was deciding that I wasn't going to risk personally running out of funds for other things I wanted or needed, just to put gas in a stranger's tank.

By contrast, on New Year's Day the example of Jesus did inspire me to take a risk. My cell phone had a voicemail message from someone I did not recognize, calling from the hospital and wanting me to call her back. I told my family it was one of three things: either a wrong number, or some unknown relative of a Waterford church person telling me about a medical emergency, or it was someone asking for a handout. Turned out to be the latter, but something told me not to dismiss Carolyn's story.

Carolyn was persistent, but she wasn't pushy or disrespectful. I learned she was only asking for \$30 to add to her \$40 on hand, so she could keep herself, daughter, and four grandchildren from being kicked out of their lodging for another week, until her food stamps replacement card arrived. I kept wondering, "Would Jesus turn her down?"

I chose to believe her that she had walked in the freezing cold from downtown Elkhart to the Goshen hospital looking for churches or anyone who would help her ... looking for a free phone she could use to call for help. She found our church listed among others in the phone book, and my cell phone comes up for emergency needs. I just knew she wouldn't find the help she needed, not on New Year's Day. I gave her \$40 that Janette and I had reserved for some special tithing opportunity that might come along. With no trolley service running on a holiday, Jesse and I gave her a ride back home to Elkhart, which gave me a chance to hear how bad things happen to basically good people.

By the end of those two and a half hours attending to Carolyn, I really didn't care if I was getting the wool pulled over my eyes. I had just helped "Jesus" get by for another week in poverty.

b) Like the wise men, sometimes we give the Christ child the gift of stepping out in obedient risk, and ... sometimes we lack the courage.

4. In Isaiah 60, the prophet tells God's people that their light is going to shine so brightly that nations are going to be drawn to the attractiveness of that light

a) God's people will not only see God's glory revealed, but they will themselves be radiant ... a light that shows God's light to the world

But that baby who received the wise men's gifts later grew up to be a traveling preacher who told his followers that a lamp cannot be hidden under a bushel basket ...

it has to be put out there, on a lampstand so that others can see it and give glory to God

b) My friends, let your light shine! What risks are you willing to take for the newborn King of Kings and for his kingdom?

C. Gift of devotion and worship

1. Matthew 2 tells us when the wise men saw the child and his mother, they *first* knelt down and paid him homage ... *only then* did they open up their treasure chests
2. They didn't just admire him ...
 - a) didn't just leave with satisfaction because their mission was accomplished and the gifts were delivered
 - b) They recognized the presence of royalty, and *they worshipped him* ... (whether or not they became converts to a new religion is not the point) ...
 - c) these distinguished men humbled themselves and knelt down in honor of someone much greater than themselves, even a baby
3. *That is the gift that God most wants from us, too ... our worship*, which is a great segue into our upcoming Sunday morning series
 - a) For the next five Sundays we will explore what worship is and why we come together to worship God
 - b) All the money we put in the offering plate doesn't mean much to God if our heart's not in it and it's not an act of worship
 - c) We may do all kinds of good deeds even as Christians, but if it's for our own pride and satisfaction, then God's light has been dimmed
4. In the final sense, the wise men's gift of worshipping the Christ child not only preceded their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, it also surpassed those gifts ... Why?

IV. (Conclusion)

A. Because the best gifts of the wise men didn't come in treasure boxes

1. Similarly, our best Christmas gifts don't come in wrapping paper, and they aren't confined to just this season of the year
2. More than gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the gifts of time, of risk, and of worship express the true cost of honoring the newborn king

B. When I look at the model of the wise men, the greatest gift we can give to God is not a what ... it's a how ...

1. God wants everything we give to God to be given in a spirit of worship ...
2. Our money and material resources, our talents, our time, our sense of security ... whatever it is, when we give it humbly in worship of our Savior, *that* is a gift worthy of Jesus!