

*The Gift Only You Can Give*  
Matthew 2:1-12

In 1858, a scientific expedition passed through what we today call the Grand Canyon. A young lieutenant wrote in his report: “This region is altogether valueless. It can be approached only from the South, and after entering it there is nothing to do but leave. It shall be forever unvisited and undisturbed.”

In 1863, when Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address, a newspaper editor in Harrisburg wrote, “We pass over the silly remarks of the President. For the credit of the nation we are willing that the veil of oblivion shall be dropped over them and that they shall no more be repeated or thought of.”

Two thousand years ago, a child was born. The next morning, as the Bethlehem townspeople greeted each other, many may have agreed, “Nothing much happened last night.” And yet, that one event changed the world forever. *God became one of us, that we might become one with Him.*

Less than two weeks ago, people around the world opened their Christmas presents. But now, let’s give the *Christ* of Christmas his, in this moment, and until his first coming leads to his second. *What does Jesus want from us?* Why will this question matter to your soul, to your family, to your community – all year long? [Pause]

Matthew alone tells us about the “Magi.” Let’s separate biblical facts from 20 centuries of tradition. We typically put three wise men in our manger scenes, since they brought three kinds of gifts. But they usually traveled in groups of twelve or more for safety. [P] Pilgrims claimed to have discovered their bones in the 4th century. In 1162, they were supposedly moved to Cologne, Germany, where they are enshrined today. But no one really knows where they died and were buried.

In truth, the Magi were much more like us than any others in Jesus’ birth story. Like us, and unlike Mary and Joseph, they were *Gentiles*. They lived in Persia, the first foreigners invited to worship the Christ. Like us, and unlike Mary and Joseph, they

were *people of means*. In fact, they were so wealthy that they could afford to leave their homes for a journey lasting likely over two years, and afford the finest gifts to give the Child.

Like us, and unlike the shepherds, they were *well educated*. In fact, they were the most learned people in their society – scholars in philosophy, medicine, and science ... Like us, they were *people of faith*. In fact, they were religious leaders in ancient Persia. No sacrifice could be made in their worship unless one of the Magi were present. [P]

*So, how did they know of the birth of the Christ?* Remember, the Jewish people had been enslaved in Babylon six centuries before Christ. Even after they were permitted to return to Judea, many chose to stay in Persia. During the decades in exile, the Israelites clung to the prophecies of the Messiah who would liberate them. And so their teachings regarding a coming Messiah were known to the Persians, and especially interested the Magi. They knew a Liberator, the King of the Jews, was coming.

That belief became even more popular in the years preceding Christ's birth. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote, "*There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated for a man coming from Judea to rule the world.*" And according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Jews believed that "*about that time one from their country should become governor of the inhabitable earth.*"

The Jewish scriptures even told the Magi how the Messiah would come: "*A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel*" (Num. 24:17). And so, "*Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn*" (Isa. 60:3). "*Herds of camels will cover your land ... All from Sheba [the Magi's homeland] will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord*" (Isa. 60:6).

So the Scriptures foretold that a star would announce the arrival of this Messiah. Then just such a star appeared before them! [Pause] Over and over, the Bible baffles our curiosity about just how certain things happened. How did this "star" get the Magi from the east to Jerusalem?

Our text does not say that it led them on the way to Jerusalem; it only says, “*we saw his star in the east ...*” (Matt. 2:2). And then, how did that star “*go ahead of them*” in the little 5-mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, as Matthew 2:9 says it did? And how is it that the star “*stopped over the place where the child was*”?

The answer is: We do not know. There are numerous efforts to explain it in terms of conjunctions of planets or comets or supernovas or miraculous lights. We just don’t know. But what is plain is that this “star” is doing something that it cannot do on its own. *There is only one Person that can be behind that intentionality in the stars: God Himself.* The point is clear: *God is guiding foreigners to His Son so that they can worship him.* And He is doing it by exerting global – even universal – influence to get it done.

The Gospel of Luke shows God influencing the entire Roman Empire so that the census comes at the exact time to get an unknown virgin to Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy with her delivery. Matthew shows God influencing the stars in the sky to get a group of pagan foreigners to Bethlehem so that they can worship the King of kings.

*So what was their journey like?* Again, we don’t know much. But we do know that it took longer than our nativity scenes allow. Much longer, in fact. To find the Christ, they had to travel for likely over a year after his birth. This is why Matthew’s account says that they came to his “house,” not his manger, and found the “child,” not the “baby” (v. 11). And this is why the murderous King Herod killed all the Jewish boys in the vicinity under 2 years of age (v. 16). All in a vain attempt to preserve power ...

*And what of the gifts they carried with them to present to this divinely chosen child?* *Gold*, for Persians never came before a *king* without it. *Frankincense*, an oil which priests used to cover the odor of burning sacrifices. A gift for a *priest*. *Myrrh*, an anointing substance which served many purposes, most notably ... for embalming and *burial*. [P] Each of these gifts *proclaim* who this child is – but they also *point* to what He would become, what He would accomplish – for you and me and all the nations.

If the Wise Men could visit us today, they might well ask – “*How wise are you?*” Are we wise enough to do what they did, to seek out and worship the Christ?

Some refuse the child like Herod, afraid he will interfere with their plans and dreams ... Some ignore Him like the scribes and priests in Jerusalem. They refused to go with the Magi to find the Messiah, so busy with their own lives and work, they made no time for Him ... But what about the Wise?

The Wise still seek him as their *Savior/Sacrifice*. Wise men & women accept his death on the cross for their sins, and trust him for their salvation. As the Magi offered their myrrh, so the wise offer to him their grateful faith in his sacrifice. Are you this wise?

The Wise still seek him as their *Priest*. As the priest offered daily sacrifices and met the people daily for worship, so you can meet him now. You need not take years to travel 500 miles, for he is here, for you today. To be your priest. To pray for you. To lead you into the presence of the Father. To guide you in his Kingdom service. As the Magi offered their incense, so the wise trust him to be their Priest. Are you this wise?

The Wise still seek him as their *King*. They give to him their gifts and abilities, possessions and time. Not just that which is convenient or habitual, but their very best to him as their King and Lord. As the Magi offered their gold, so the wise give to him their lives. Are you this wise?

Most of all, the Wise give him their *worship*. Before the Magi opened their treasures, they first opened their hearts. They bowed and worshipped him. They gave him hearts filled with joy in his presence. So can we. As the Magi offered their worship, so the wise live each day in his presence. Are you this wise? [Pause]

*The story of the Magi is a story of divine sovereignty*, a tale of God’s intervention in time and history, in the heavens and on earth. And His sovereignty hasn’t changed! If God could move his people to Babylon six centuries before His Son’s birth, so the Magi could read their prophetic promises about a coming King of the Jews; if He could use the Magi’s pagan religion to prepare them for the coming of his Son; if God could move Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to Bethlehem (though they would not understand why

and would have to endure much); and if He could create a supernatural star to guide the Magi precisely to their house ... what can't He do for you? Where can't He guide you?

*Where do you need to know that God is in charge?* [P] What about 2019 is worrying you this morning? What decisions or dilemmas are you facing? [P] Life can be chaotic. It's often uncertain. But in the midst of it all, there's a sovereign God more than able to guide your steps. Ask Him for the wisdom to know what steps to take. Ask Him for the strength to take them. Ask that His Spirit fill you and lead you each and every day, each and every moment. [P]

Our sovereign Lord led the Magi to feet of Jesus, where they offered Him much more than their gifts – they offered Him their hearts. [P] What about you? Will you bow before Him as your King, your Priest, and your Sacrifice? Will you spend the coming year in worship and service to Him? [P] The Magi had to eventually return home; they had to part company with Christ. But you don't. [P] *Will you offer Him the gift that only you can give?* Will you offer Him your worship? Will you offer Him your life?

This time of year is marked as a time of renewal. And we serve the God who makes all things new – including you and me! So we want to give you the opportunity to come and offer yourselves to the Lord anew this morning, and to ask Him to renew you to worship and serve Him in the days to come. [*Music playing during time of invitation*]