

The Epiphany of Our Lord (Observed); January 7, 2024  
+ Matthew 2:1-12 +  
“See the Perfect Gift; Give the Best Gifts”

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. He gathered together all the people’s chief priests and experts in the law. He asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, because this was written through the prophet:**

**You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not least among the rulers of Judah: because out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd my people, Israel.”**

**Then Herod secretly summoned the Wise Men and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him.”**

**After listening to the king, they went on their way. Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. After they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.**

The Wise Men give a lot. We all know they gave gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But think of all they gave before and after that.

Before they ever left home, they gave their minds. They read the Old Testament scrolls, which had apparently reached well beyond Israel’s borders. They used their eyes and brains to read and study and learn that a divine King was going to be born in Israel, marked by the rising of an unmistakable star.

How much of your mind do you give to God’s Word? How much of your time in study? Not just passive listening, while half paying attention, but active, alert investigation of the Bible to learn all you can from God’s revelation? It’s what the wise men gave. How about you?

Then they give their time to travel from “the east” – and where exactly “the east” is, we don’t even know. But wherever it was, it required them to give them their time and their effort. Not only that, but it was time and effort that required them to leave their work and their families for a time. They did it all to get to Jesus and worship him.

How much are you willing to sacrifice to worship Jesus? What excuses do you find not to be here to hear his Word and receive his sacrament, to bow down to him with your songs and prayers and your confession of faith? Is a little traffic enough to keep you away? A bit of a late night? Sunday morning activities that have become, in your estimation, more important?

Look what else they were willing to surrender: their safety. It’s possible they were unaware at first of just what a complete psychopath they were dealing with in King Herod, but every king is at least a little

dangerous, and much more dangerous when they hear mention of a new king being born. They risked much more their time and effort to get to Jesus; they risked their necks.

So often Christians today will not come to worship if they have to give much of anything at all to get there. And when we do get here, our attention divides and our minds wander.

But the Wise Men gave their hearts to Jesus, too. When they found him, they rejoiced. And here is a literal translation of St. Matthew's Gospel: "When they found it, they rejoiced exceedingly greatly with overwhelming joy."

How much joy is your heart and mine when we find our Savior in his Word and Supper? Or is our reaction to Jesus sometimes more like this: "Oh, here we go. Time to hear how much Jesus loves me again, as if I've never heard that before. Hopefully it's quick; my football pregame show starts in a few minutes."

Just in case you don't feel lousy yet, we're just getting started! When the Wise Men reached Jesus, they worshipped him. Him, and nothing and no one else.

What do we let nudge Jesus off of our hearts' throne? What do we love more than him, even just once in a while? Myself. My money. My job. My entertainment and enjoyment. I will bow down to them all in my heart, from time to time, ahead of Jesus.

Now let's get back to that gold and frankincense and myrrh. But of course they gave Jesus wildly expensive gifts! They were Wise Men, so they were rich! Do we know that? And even if they were rich, they gave him their best. It's not the level of our gifts, it's whether they are joyful and generous according to what God's given us. And theirs were.

Are your gifts to Jesus generous and joyful? This is about more than the dollars you contribute to your church. It is also about the help you give to your friends and neighbors in need, who are Jesus to you. It's also about your time and your energy to serve your Savior inside the walls of this church, at your job, and in your home. Our whole lives are to be joyful, generous, sacrifices to Jesus. Do you consciously offer your best, generously and joyfully, not just in those plates, but to your neighbors and spouse and boss?

But the Wise Men – hard as it is to believe – were still not done giving. To the very end, they give. They give God their obedience at the end of this Gospel. When he warns them to stay away from Herod, they listen.

Some of God's commands are easier to pay attention to than others. If he came to you in a dream and warned you to stay away from a homicidal lunatic, it wouldn't take much for you to listen and obey. But what about the commands that are harder to listen to? "Love your enemy." How do you do with that one? "Rejoice in the Lord always." "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two."

So, in conclusion, the wise men were perfect. And we're rotten. So, feel guilty – very guilty! – and be more the Wise Men. Amen...But of course not.

The key to this story is not that the Wise Men were good and you should be too. The key is that Jesus is perfect, and the Wise Men knew it. So they give him their best. The Wise Men were not perfect. If they were, they would have read the Old Testament back in their home country, learned of the Savior-King coming to Israel, shrugged their shoulders, and said, "Meh. We don't need him. Let's stay here at home."

They left because they needed a Savior, and they knew he had been born even for Gentiles like them. And God's gift of the Savior compelled them to lay down their study, time, their energy, their jobs (for a while), their families (for a while), their safety, their worship, their wealth, and their obedience.

They do look perfect for the twelve verses they appear in Scripture, but that's because they're only around for twelve verses! They don't have much time to sin. But they were sinners, and they knew it. And they knew that Jesus was their God and their Savior. And the gift God sent them led them to give him so many good gifts back.

The mistake in the story of the Wise is to focus mostly on the Wise Men! Their eyes and hearts were all on Jesus their Savior. Jesus was God's perfect gift to them.

And he is the same to us. Because we know more than twelve verses about ourselves. We know our failures to study God's Word with perfect diligence, our selfishness with our time and energy that has kept us from worship, our half-hearted and misdirected worship, our stinginess with God's gifts, and our disregard for his commands.

The wise men weren't perfect; we know we're sinners. And Jesus is the gift God gives us, too.

What exactly did the Wise Men see in this gift from God? What does God give them and us in Jesus? You can hear it in their words, and see it in their worship. When arrive in Jerusalem, they ask to see specifically: **"The King of the Jews."** Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard the word "King," because he only knew of one kind: a human king who would challenge his authority. What Herod did not understand, because it can only be understood by faith, is that there is another kind of King, one with a "K," who is not the least bit interested in sitting on an earthly throne. He is the King who comes off the throne of heaven and joins us to crush Satan, slaughter sin, and kill death. He is the King with subjects all over the world, because he rules the heart of everyone who believes in his saving work. He is the King who now sits on heaven's throne again and rules all the nations of this world for his Church's good.

They knew the gift of God in Christ: their conquering King, ruler of his people's hearts. And as the Wise Men worship Christ, you see again how well they understand the gift God had given. Although they are standing in front of a little boy, they bow down to him and worship him as their God. This is a truth only the Holy Spirit can teach and convince us of: the little boy is God giving the gift of himself. Only God himself, joining his nature to ours in that little boy, has the power and perfection to defeat those evil enemies of ours and conquer our hearts with his love.

This is the gift God gives to the Wise Men, to us, and to all people: his divine Son, also human, to save us from our enemies and win our hearts.

This faith, and this faith alone, produces study like the Wise Men's. This is the faith that sits in Bible classes, reads and studies at home, and teaches children the truth of God's Word. This faith alone produces the sacrifice of time and energy to worship him, to worship him alone, to worship him with full sincerity and attention. This faith alone offers joyful and free and generous gifts in all areas of life. This faith alone inspires obedience to God's commands, no matter how challenging.

We have that faith, the faith that receives God's gift of the King of the Jews, God in our flesh, who comes to win the victory over our foes and win our hearts with his gospel. We have a sinful nature, too, which is why we do not display with perfection the results of this faith. But here is what God promises us: when

we grow in our faith, we will also continue to grow in the study, the sacrifice, the worship, the generosity, and the obedience of the Wise Men.

To be more like the Wise Men, do not focus on the Wise Men. Focus on Jesus. Read and listen to his love in God's Word. Taste it and see it today in his Supper and every opportunity you have. You do not get to kneel in front of him as a little boy, but God still has his ways of showing us his Son, our King, who came to fight and win against our enemies, and to win our hearts.

Keep your eyes and your heart on him. Know in faith the gift has given you. Know the perfect gift of God better and better. And the gifts you give to God will be better and better, too. Amen.