

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 22, 2019**

### **WHAT JESUS WANTS FOR CHRISTMAS (3)**

#### **Matthew 2:1-12**

Among the Christmas carols I (and probably most of you) grew up singing was “We Three Kings.” It was written in 1857 by an Episcopal minister named John Henry Hopkins, Jr. and was originally called “Three Kings of Orient.” It begins like this:

We three kings of Orient are:  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar –  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain –  
Following yonder star.

O star of wonder, star of night,  
Star with royal beauty bright,  
Westward leading, still proceeding,  
Guide us to thy perfect light.

There are just one or two problems with this carol and the traditional understanding of the journey undertaken by “wise men from the east” who came to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in search of the Messiah.

The first problem, if it is a problem, is the number three. Were there three? Actually, Matthew doesn’t say. He speaks of “wise men” or “Magi,” both of which are plural. But he doesn’t say exactly how many “wise men” made the long trip from the east. Maybe there were three. But maybe there were two. Or four. Or more. All we know for certain is that there were more than one.

The reason we associate the number three with the wise men is because Matthew mentions the three gifts they brought to Jesus: gold, incense, and myrrh.

- Gold was a sign of the royalty of Jesus and His right to rule over His people;
- Incense was a sign of His deity and the worship that is due Him; and
- Myrrh, an expensive spice and perfume used in embalming, was a sign of His suffering and death to come, which was the purpose of His coming into the world.

Because the wise men brought three gifts, it is assumed that there must have been three wise men and that each one brought a separate gift. Maybe there *were* three. Matthew doesn’t say. From about the 6<sup>th</sup> century on, the wise men have been known as Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar. These could have been their names. But we can’t say for sure, because the Bible doesn’t say, and there is, as far as I know, no other historical evidence of their names.

One year I got a Christmas card – I’m sorry to say I don’t remember who it was from – which said there was a fourth wise man ... who brought a fruitcake as his gift to Jesus. I can tell you for sure that that is not in the Bible!

So, the first problem with “We Three Kings” is the number three. The second problem is calling them “kings.” Nowhere does Matthew refer to them as kings or rulers. The idea that they were kings may have developed because the gifts they brought to Jesus were so expensive. In many places, for many centuries, only royals were wealthy enough to give such expensive gifts to others. So it may seem reasonable to assume that the wise men were kings.

But Matthew does not call them kings. He calls them wise men. The word he uses is *Magi*, which is the plural of *magos*, from which we get the word “magic.” English Bible translations usually refer to them as “wise men.” Eugene Peterson calls them “a band of scholars” (MSG). They came “from the east” – most likely, from Babylon or Persia or Arabia. English poet John Milton referred to them as “star-led wizards.” They studied the sky, believing that both present and future events could be discerned in the movement or alignment of the stars. They were learned in the philosophy and science of their day, and esteemed as men of wisdom. Hence, the title *Magi* or “wise men.” They believed in astrology, which is the idea that a person’s destiny in life is influenced or determined by the particular star under which he or she is born. Of course, a lot of people still believe that today. Lots of people seek guidance from horoscopes, even though there is absolutely no biblical basis or support for such a belief. Belief in astrology and horoscopes runs directly counter to our confident trust in God and our willing obedience to His Word. Don’t ever allow a horoscope to determine what you do or don’t do. In fact, don’t give it any credence in your life. Don’t waste your time with it.

How much the wise men knew or understood about the promise of a Jewish Messiah is hard to tell, but God sovereignly used their calculations to bring them to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem at a momentous time.

There are some other things in the story of the wise men and their journey to find Jesus that we don’t know for sure. We don’t know, for example, exactly when the wise men got to Bethlehem and gave their gifts to Jesus. We can be pretty sure, though, that Christmas cards, nativity scenes, and Christmas pageants notwithstanding, they probably did not arrive in Bethlehem on the night of Jesus’ birth. They did not find Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. They did not find Him in a stable. They found Him, as Matthew says in verse 11, in a house with His mother Mary.

So we don’t know exactly how old Jesus was when the wise men came. Judging from Herod’s insane, jealous order to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years of age and under (2:16), it is possible that Jesus was a toddler at the time of their visit. He may have been 6-to-12 months old, or even a little older. We can’t say for sure. Matthew doesn’t tell us precisely when the wise men showed up, only that it was “after Jesus was born” (2:1).

In addition, we don't know exactly when Jesus was born. We don't know if December 25 is His actual birthday. One of the early church fathers, Clement of Alexandria, who died in the year 220 AD, believed Jesus was born on November 17, 3 BC.

The exact year of Jesus' birth is also uncertain. Our calendar hinges on the date of His birth. Just a few days remain in 2019 AD. "AD" stands for *Anno Domini*, "the Year of Our Lord." The birth of Jesus is the dividing line between BC ("Before Christ") and AD. But our calendar is probably off by a few years. Jesus was probably born sometime between 6 BC and 3 BC.

Then there is the star the wise men saw in the east. Do you know what it was? Only God knows for sure. Was it a comet? Maybe. Was it a supernova – an exploding star – that led the wise men to Jerusalem? Could have been. Was it an unusual alignment of the planets Jupiter and Saturn? Possibly. Or was it something else? Was it something supernatural? Was it a miraculous sign in the heavens, not unlike the pillars of cloud and fire that led Israel through the wilderness in the days of Moses? Was it a divinely-orchestrated revelation of God's Shekinah glory in the natural realm?

Whatever it was, God in His providence used the light of that star in the heavens to lead these wise men to the Savior of the world. Listen to what John Piper says: "What is plain concerning this matter of the star is that it is doing something that it cannot do on its own: It is guiding magi to the Son of God to worship Him. There is only one Person in biblical thinking (who) can be behind that intentionality in the stars: God Himself. So the lesson is plain: God is guiding foreigners to Christ to worship Him. And He is doing it by exerting global – probably even universal – influence and power to get it done.... Matthew shows God influencing the stars in the sky to get foreign magi to Bethlehem so that they can worship Him."

What an amazing God!

There are some details of the Christmas story, including some details in the story of the visit of the wise men, that we simply do not know. There are some things that remain a mystery to us. But what we do know makes all the difference in the world.

We do not know exactly *when* Jesus was born. There was no birth certificate signed by an attending physician. But we do know *that* Jesus was born. We do know that the Son of God became a living, breathing, human being and lived among us on this earth. We know that He came to redeem us from our sin, to reconcile us to God the Father, and to rule in our lives as God and King. We know not only that He was born, but also that He suffered and died on a cross, not because He had done anything wrong, but because He loved us so much that He gave His life to pay the penalty for *our* sin and to endure the punishment *we* deserve. And we know that death could not hold Him in its grasp. For He rose again from the dead and has taken His place as Lord at the right hand of God the Father.

We may not know the exact *when* of Jesus' birth, but we do know the *why* and the *where*. We know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a little town just a few miles south of Jerusalem, just as

God had promised more than 700 years earlier through the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2-5; Matthew 2:4-6). When Jesus was born in the most humble circumstances, God kept His word. Just as He always does.

We know, too, that it was in Bethlehem where the wise men, guided by the light of the star and then by the light of God's Word, found the Savior of the world.

And we know why the wise men came. They were, you could say, men on a mission. You might even say they were men on a mission from God. They came, they said, to worship the One who was born King of the Jews (2:2). They didn't understand everything, but what they did understand was that God was up to something and, for some reason, He clued them in on it. Spurred on by the star, they came in search of God's promised Messiah, the Savior, in order to worship Him.

Here is something to think about. Even if the carol, "We Three Kings", is a bit inaccurate, there are in fact two kings in Matthew's recounting of the visit of the wise men. The two kings are Herod, who is referred to as a king in verses 1, 3, and 9; and Jesus, the One "born King of the Jews" (verse 2). Herod wasn't really a king in the way we think of kings or queens. He had the title "King," but he was really the Roman governor in charge of Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth. He was a brutal, maniacal leader who had members of his family put to death when he viewed them as threats to his power. As long as he ruled over Palestine, he would tolerate no rivals. Which explains his decision to slaughter the innocents of Bethlehem when he learned of the arrival of the one "born King of the Jews."

Contrast Herod, this Roman-appointed king of the Jews, with Jesus, the God-appointed King of all Kings (Douglas S. O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 62). To which king would you want to submit? Under whose rule would you want to live? Doesn't Matthew make the decision rather easy? Which king would you choose?

As one pastor put it: "Do you want a madman or the Messiah? Do you want a man who would order the massacre of innocent children (verse 16) or a man who would open His arms to children and lay down His life for the less-than-innocent of the world? Do you want a ruler who rules by force, aggression, and cruelty, or a ruler who rules by love, compassion, and the cross of His own sufferings? Do you want a man who slaughtered the last remnants of the dynasty that ruled before him, put to death half of the Sanhedrin, killed 300 court officers, executed his wife and mother-in-law and three sons, and, as he lay dying, arranged for all the notable men of Jerusalem to be assembled in (a stadium) and killed as soon as his own death was announced, so the people might weep instead of rejoice on the day of his death? Do you want him for a king? Or do you want the One who when reviled did not revile in return, who when He suffered did not threaten but rather bore our sins in His body on the tree (1 Peter 2:21-25)? Whom do you want? Do you want the Big Bad Wolf or the Good Shepherd – a 'shepherd king' like David? One who would finally and perfectly 'shepherd' (His) people Israel'?" (O'Donnell, *Matthew*, 60-61.)

Which king would you choose? Which king have you chosen? This is not to say that your only choice is between Herod and Jesus. It *is* to say that your only choice is between Jesus

and any other king, any other ruler, any other sovereign, any other relationship, any other love, any other “god” that occupies first place in your heart and life.

When it comes to Jesus, Matthew’s account of the visit of the wise men shows there are at least three different ways you can respond to Him. You can be indifferent or apathetic like the Jewish religious leaders who had the prophecies of Scripture to inform and guide them, but who couldn’t be bothered to go and look for the promised Messiah. They weren’t even curious when the wise men came from a long distance and told them about the star. You can be indifferent, even happily indifferent to the greatest news of the most momentous event in the history of history. But it will not serve you or anyone well to be indifferent or willfully ignorant. If you miss out on it, or cause others to miss out on it, you will regret it.

You can also choose, as Herod did, to be hostile to Jesus. You can choose to hate Jesus. You can hate everything He stands for, and everyone and everything associated with Him – His teachings, His church, His followers, His kingdom. If you do, you will have lots of company. Millions of people today want to destroy Jesus’ church and rid the world of His influence. There are many things one might say in response to this. One is: This world is a troubled place, but can you imagine how much worse, how much more evil, how much more dark and despairing it would be if Jesus had never come? If the Word (God Himself) had not taken on our flesh and blood and “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14, *MSG*)? If the Son of God had not come and willingly offered His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins?

All who choose to be hostile to Jesus will one day see the error of their ways.

The third option is to do what the wise men did. Why did they make the long journey from the east to Jerusalem and Bethlehem? They came, they said, “to worship Him” (2:2). They came to worship God’s Messiah. They came to honor and pay tribute to the King of the Jews. When they came to the house and saw Jesus with His mother Mary, what did they do? “They bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and incense and myrrh” (2:11).

To worship Him – to acknowledge and declare and ascribe to him the worth-ship that is rightly His – is, as Paul says in Romans 12, our “reasonable service” (12:1, KJV). He says: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will” (12:1-2).

Do you know what O. Henry, the author, said about the magi in his famous short story, *The Gift of the Magi*? He said they “were wise men – wonderfully wise men who ... invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication....” (O. Henry, *The Gift of the Magi*).

It is a touching story, his story about Jim and Della Young and their desire to give each other a most meaningful Christmas gift, despite their poverty. But O. Henry did not have it quite right. It was not the magi who invented the art of giving Christmas presents. It was God. He thought of it first. He gave the first and best Christmas present ever when He gave us the gift of His Son. No other gift will ever compare.

But what, we may ask, does Jesus want for Christmas? The wise men brought expensive gifts with significant monetary and symbolic value: gold, incense, and myrrh. Are these the gifts Jesus wants from you? From me? From us?

Maybe. But only if such gifts point to something even more valuable, something more precious than all the money and accoutrements of position and power in the whole world. What Jesus wants for Christmas from each of us is our heart. Our love. Our worship. Not just for one hour a week on Sundays, but 24/7. What Jesus wants (and deserves) is to have first place and first priority in your life and relationships. Jesus wants you, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourself as a living sacrifice to Him. He wants you to give Him yourself as a way of thanking Him for giving Himself for you.

Have you done that? Will you do it? Will you do it this Christmas? Will you do it day after day, for as long as you live? In so doing, you will bring joy to the heart of Jesus.

Lord, let it be so in each of us. Amen.