

# *A Joyful Offering*

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Many of us, maybe most of us, know the song. Maybe it's even one of our favorite Christmas carols. Maybe it's one of our least. We'll sing it at the end of the service: "We three kings of Orient are...."

Now you've got to admit: it sounds a little weird. I mean, who these days talks this way, ending a phrase with a verb: "We three kings of Orient *are*." It sounds kind of like Yoda from *Star Wars*.

"Strong in the ways of the Force young Skywalker is."

"We three kings of Orient are."

Ah, yes: Pastor Dan ruins everything.

You're welcome!

Actually, there's another problem with the hymn. Not a big problem, not at all. Just a little one. It's that it says there were three wise men. "We *three* kings...." And then each one of the remaining verses speaks in the voice of each king in turn, describing the gift he brought with him and then gave to the infant Jesus.

The problem is that it never in fact says in the Bible there were three wise men (or "kings," or "magi"). It simply talks about them without counting them: "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem."

We are never told how many of these visitors there were. Yet, through the combined influence of artful imagination and traditional celebrations and pious shorthand, we've been led to *suppose* or *assume* that there were three of them, because, well, there were three gifts!

That's right. We read that the magi gave to the infant Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Three gifts — or maybe three *kinds* of gifts — so we assume that, well, to be fair, each gift must have been brought by a different person. So we end up with three wise men. But nowhere in scripture does it say that there were *three* of them. There could have been ten. There could have been two. We really don't know.

But regardless of how many visitors there were, they certainly had come from far away. It's likely that they were from somewhere in Persia, that is, Iran, although perhaps they were from as far west as modern-day Baghdad, Iraq. At any rate, these "wise men from the East" came from well beyond the borders of Judah. Which made them inhabitants of a land hardly known to Herod and his subjects, adherents of a religion neither accepted nor much understood by the people of Judah. In short, they were outsiders.

What drew them all that distance? What moved them, in their hearts and in their minds, to travel so far in search of a new king whose birth,

they believed,  
they intuited,  
they discerned,

had been communicated in the night sky?

Regardless of reasons and motives, it's likely that they had the resources to make this trek. In their own country, quite likely, they were not outsiders, but instead men of wealth and privilege. They were smart, capable, savvy. They understood the operations of the heavens well enough to notice when something different appeared, and to perceive something of its God-given importance. They had the means to act on this knowledge. They had considerable wealth enabling them to leave home for a lengthy journey. They were able to carry some of their treasure with them and to protect it along the way. And then at the end of their journey they could give of their wealth to the newborn king they had been led to find, placing before him their joyful offering.

I think this is striking, and I think it's important:

The wise men went to the capital of Judah, they went to Jerusalem, they asked among the powerful in that center of power where the newborn king could be found, expecting that he was likely right there, that everyone would know, that they'd already be celebrating. And when the answer came back that they should maybe look in some little town of no-account, some tiny village of "Who Cares?", they basically said, "Well, alrighty, sounds good to us!"

The wise men had all this wealth and privilege, they were so important, and when they discovered that the baby they were seeking was born in Bethlehem,

was likely *in* Bethlehem,  
*Bethlehem*,  
a place of almost no significance,  
a small town outside that nation's center of power and privilege,

they never once balked. Instead, they simply and joyfully ... gave him his birthday presents. In short, they came to him anyway, drawn to him

even in his humble circumstances,  
even in his poverty,  
even in his anonymity,  
even in his powerlessness.

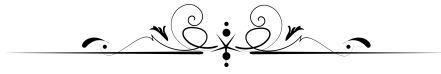
You know, I don't think they were just being polite.

When they did get to him, it says that they were happy. Oh, they were more than happy, more than just a little pleased. Verse 10: "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

Even that, I think, doesn't quite get at it. Matthew, as he writes it in the language of his time, he is almost stuttering with elation, as if to say "They rejoiced a joy, a great one, extremely!"

Clearly, other emotions would not fit. It would make no sense for them to arrive at this point and be sullen, or stoic, or bored, or to act as if it were no big deal. They were filled with joy.

And yet this was an emotion that didn't just stay inside them. Their joy didn't remain a feeling, having no impact on their doing. Out of their joy, they offered to the Christ child the treasures they had brought for him. They gave to him a joyfully offering.



You know something? I love those wise men. They make me feel happy. They make me feel inspired. They make me want to join them in their joy, and to emulate their joyful generosity.

But at the same time, I don't like *all* of how they make me feel. Because they also make me feel a little ashamed. Their example shames me.

And the thing is, I think it should shame a good many of us.

Here's why I'm a bit ashamed. I'm struck by the all too obvious contrast between their response to Christ and our own, between their generosity and our own. Their joyful offering is an indictment of our all-too-sullen Christian witness and of our stingy stewardship for the cause of Christ.

They came from afar, and we can barely get out of bed.

They devoted their assets so they could find Jesus and know him, and we find it *such a burden* to provide a ministry by which Christ can be encountered and known in our time and place.

They marshaled their resources to worship Christ, and we see worship as yet another form of entertainment, which we judge as "good" or "bad" by standards that are, frankly, selfish and uninformed.

They were eager to see the king, and we go to our places of prayer and worship (whether these be in the company of others or in solitude) with no expectation that anything great will happen there.

They approached Jesus with joy, and we worship sullenly, distractedly, critically.

I want this to change.

I pray that this will change.

But again, I come back to the infectious joy of the wise men, and how I love them.

Don't you?

I feel them encouraging us with their joy.

Don't you?

I sense them urging us to have hearts filled with love and devotion for Christ, so filled that they overflow in acts of generosity.

Don't you?

And at times, I feel that we can, and we will, that our lives, too, can be in their totality a joyful offering.

Don't you?

May we be blessed, more and more, to love Christ with a devotion and joy that cannot be contained but finds visible expression in acts of generous love. May God enable us and bless us to give ourselves to Jesus as a joyful offering.