

PP The Gift

Part 2-Matthew 2:1-12

12/8-9/2018

Years ago, there was a Billboard battle that took place at either end of the Lincoln Tunnel Near the New Jersey entrance, one Billboard said, **PP** *"You know it's a myth. This season, celebrate reason!"*

On the New York end, read another, **PP** *"You know it's real. This season, celebrate Jesus."*

What a contrasting perspective on Christmas, one that is fought out each year this time

If you were to visit the Illinois Statehouse right now, you would see a Nativity scene, a Menorah, and new this year, donated by the Chicago Satanic Temple, a Snaketivity

PP (Pic) A sculpture of an arm holding an apple with a snake coiled around it, sitting on a black box inscribed with, *"Knowledge is the Greatest Gift"*

While Christmas can bring out tensions in atheists and Satanists, for the Christian, it is a time of the year when once again, we marvel that God would send His Son to be born as a baby into this world of darkness and sin, to bring hope and salvation

Open with me to Matthew 2 as we follow the flow of the story of the Wise men and pay particular attention to the second gift they presented to the Christ child

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him." 2:1-2

The world, at the time of Christ's birth, was abuzz with a sense of imminent global change, and the anticipation was centering on Judea, the southern region of the Jewish people

The Roman historian **PP** Seutonius wrote, *"There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judea to rule the world."*

Another historian at that time wrote **PP** *"there was a firm persuasion that at this very time the east was to grow powerful and rulers coming from Judea were to acquire a universal empire."*

At that time, much more than today with our scientific advancements, the movements of stars and natural phenomenon were considered to be divine communications

If an asteroid fell on your head, it was considered a message from the gods

When a bright star would appear in the ancient world, or when a comet streaked across the night sky, it was considered a divine message that a significant person was born

So these ***'wise men from the east'***, a group of high ranking priest scholars from Parthia begin a journey from modern day Iraq and Western Iran to Jerusalem in Judea

The bible doesn't tell us how many wise men there were in this group, and legends, as usual sprung up around them

They grew to the point where there were three of them, named Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar Melchior supposedly gave gold, Caspar frankincense, and Balthasar the myrrh

Truth is, we have no idea, and the Bible doesn't tell us

But they travel to Jerusalem and encounter a wicked, cruel tyrant in Israel, Herod the king

We would be hard-pressed to find a greater contrast between Herod and the true king of the Jews

The birth of Christ into the world at that time was eerily similar to Charles Dickens' classic,
A Tale of Two Cities... *'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'*

God born into flesh, come to redeem the world is certainly the best of times, but it was the worst
of times in Israel because they were in bondage to the Roman Empire, and Rome had
made Herod king of the Jews, and he was hated and despised

In some ways he was a successful ruler, but he was insanely suspicious and jealous

When he suspected someone of being a rival to his power, that person was eliminated

He murdered his wife Mariamne, then his mother in law when she complained about it

He had 3 of his sons killed, so that the **PP** Roman emperor Augustus said of him, *'it is safer to
be Herod's pig than Herod's son'*

At 70 years old, he gave an order that upon his death the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem
should be gathered together and executed

Simply because he knew no one would mourn his own death, so he determined to guarantee that
tears would be shed on that day

It was never carried out, but his most terrible was to order that all male children 2 years and
younger be killed in Bethlehem and surrounding region, to cut off the threat to his throne

Does this help you understand the force of verse 3 that when he heard the message of the wise
men, ***"he was troubled"***, a word that described boiling, agitated water

So he tries to deceive the wise men asking them to tell him when they find the child, so that he
can worship him as well, when all the while he plans to kill him

There is a beautiful style of painting and filmmaking called Chiaroscuro, which uses light and
darkness to vividly bring out the beauty of an object or person

PP (Artwork) Pat Millen learned to paint this way, and you can see it in this framed picture she
made and gave to me

With Herod providing the dark backdrop, Matthew employs light of the reappearing star to bring
the wise men to the child Jesus, our the beauty of His glory

***"After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen
when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.
When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the
house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped
Him."*** 2:9-11

Many who worship with us have come from a church background where Mary, the mother of
Jesus has been elevated to divine status, worthy of worship

In fact, while the bible honors Mary, nowhere is she worshiped or held up as sinless or divine

It's important then to notice that the wise men saw the child first, then Mary and immediately fell
down to worship...Jesus

The custom of the Parthians was to salute a person with the same rank with a kiss on the lips

When the difference of rank was slight, they kissed on the cheek

But when one was of a inferior rank, he fell on his knees, touched his forehead to the ground,
throwing kisses at the same time toward the superior

The reaction of the wise men was this last one, falling down before their king

The Wise Men were so powerful that no man ever took the throne in the Parthian empire without
their approval

These Eastern kingmakers came to Bethlehem to recognize the One born to be king
“they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” 2:11

Pastor Matthew explained last week that the gift of gold was appropriate and fitting for a king
 In giving gold they acknowledged Him as the One in authority over them, to whom all of their possessions, motivations and service belonged

It is the symbolic meaning of gold that moves us to come to Jesus as our Savior and Lord

We are commanded, **PP** ***“In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord” 1 Peter 3:1***

It is to come to Christ in surrender, to lay down your demands, your self-will?

You may not yet perfectly understand all that it entails to come to Christ as your Lord, but you must surrender before Him, offering Him the ***“gold”*** of your worship as you recognize His authority and right to rule

Admiral Horatio Nelson, the great leader of the Royal Navy was known for his kindness and courtesy even with the enemies he defeated

One vanquished admiral, knowing this, was brought onto Nelson’s ship, and strode over to Nelson with hand outstretched as his equal

Nelson’s hand stayed by his side, and he said, *“Your sword first, sir, and then your hand.”*

It is the same with Christ and before we can be His friends, we must first submit to His Lordship
 The Wise men fell down before the Christ child, and recognized Him as their king

But what about ***‘Frankincense’***, and what do you know about it?

In the classic Christmas movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey began a spiral down into depression

One daughter was upstairs seriously sick, another one playing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* on the piano, over and over, and his son comes in asking him how to spell *‘Frankincense’*

So you’ve all likely heard of it, and right now, one of the hottest selling essential oils is Frankincense Oil

It promises to improve your mood, reduce stress as well as swelling, but that’s not all

It fights infections, aids digestion, fades scars, heals wounds, and maybe, prevent cancer

But way before those modern claims and mail-order availability, frankincense was one of the most coveted and expensive commodities

It comes from Boswellia trees that grow primarily in Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa
 Frankincense farmers slash the bark, called striping, allowing the resin to bleed out, then scraped onto wooden boards or flat stones to dry and harden into resins

These resins, called tears, were used mostly by priests along with the sacrifices offered to God

You may find it interesting to know that franc, is old french for pure

Frankincense was expensive, and only the purist sap from the first harvest was used in the temple of God

The symbolic connection of this gift of the Wise men was that this child was divine

As one great scholar and early church father once said, **PP** ***“This is the gift to God.”*** Origen

We don’t know if the Wise men truly recognized Christ as God, but their gift indicates they did

Even the pagan Roman Empire had a connection between frankincense and the worship of God

The Roman Empire was the most religiously tolerant empire that ever existed
 People could worship the god of their choice, build temples to whatever deity they pleased
 When Rome defeated a people, they allowed their religious beliefs to remain, not forcing them to
 worship the same gods
 Their benevolence was given to all, but not to the Christians...why?
 The simple reason is that they would not compromise their faith with any other religion
 Their faith and worship rested in Christ alone
 Christians in Rome were given the opportunity for their lives to be spared if they would but take
 a pinch of incense, sprinkle it on a fire that burned before the image of the Roman
 Caesar, and simply say these words: '*Caesar is Lord*'
 Hundreds, thousands would not, and were put to death for it
 The heart of the Christian message is that Jesus is God, the King of all creation
 He and no other deserves our worship, our trust, our adoration and devotion
 In the ancient world, Frankincense was associated with the worship of the divine, of God

If the Wise Men just brought camel loads of gold, then the child of Mary would be recognized as
 the king born to rule from an earthly throne
 But with the second gift of frankincense it is unmistakable that this child was the King of all
 kings, the one over all, ruling from the throne of heaven

We come to Christ with the frankincense of our worship, coming to He Who is our God
 Jesus Christ was not just a man, He was and is God born into flesh, born into humanity
 Come to dwell among humanity whom He loves
 As we see the Wise men offering Frankincense, we see ourselves offering to the Son of God our
 trust and faith that He is very God come in flesh to be with us

Do you want to experience the joy of the Wise men: ***"they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."***
 Then worship Christ, worship exceedingly, worship sacrificially, and worship appropriately
 He is your King, He is your God, and next week, we will see one more joyful part!

You're going to be flying around this month...office parties, Christmas choruses, baking,
 traveling, getting ready to receive family, church events
 But stop and breathe each day...worship...walk in that house and see the 2 year old Christ, and
 fall on your face and present Him with an offering of praise fit for your King, for your
 God
 Love Him, serve Him, adore Him, and tell someone about the God king of Christmas

Amen?

Let's pray