**Songs of the Wise Men**

**Isaiah 49:1-7; Matthew 2:1-12**

1/4/14

Thought for Meditation:

So how do we ordinary shepherds find this God who's behind all the blessed routines of life? The same way the wise men find him, and the same way those in crisis like Mary and Joseph find him. As a surprise. *Craig Barnes*

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A four year-old girl loved the Christmas story. She had memorized most of the story of baby Jesus from her Children’s Bible. One day her dad was quizzing her on her colors. He pulled out a silver crayon and asked what color it was. “Gold,” she replied. “It’s not gold. Try again.” She thought for a moment, and said, “Frankincense!” She obviously knew the story of the Wise Men.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, which is the story of the Wise Men. Officially, Epiphany is Tuesday, after the twelve days of Christmas. Since this is the closest Sunday we are going to focus on Epiphany today. I imagine that you probably know this story, but to be honest, much of what we “know” doesn’t come from the Bible but from traditions that have developed over the years.

For example, we usually talk of three Wise Men, but the Bible never says how many there were. There were three gifts, but there could have been two or twenty Wise Men. We generally call these Wise Men kings – “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” This idea was fairly well developed by about the 6th century A.D. It is based on several Old Testament passages. Psalm 72 talks about foreign kings bringing gifts to Israel’s king. Isaiah 49 talks about kings worshipping the Messiah. However, Matthew never calls them kings. He calls them “Magi from the east.”

By the 8th century A.D. these “three” Wise Men actually had names and their own unique stories. Depending on where you live there are some significant variations. The western church tends to use the following names. The first Wise Man was called Melchior. He was an old man with a long, gray beard. He was the King of Persia, modern Iran, and he brought the gift of gold. The second Wise Man was called Caspar, or Gaspar – it’s spelled several different ways. He was a young man, didn’t even have a beard. He was the king of India, and also a priest. That is why he brought the frankincense, which is used in worship. The third Wise Man is called Balthasar. He was the king of Arabia and brought the myrrh. Myrrh is found in the Middle East only in the southern part of Arabia, in what is modern day Yemen.

Laying all the traditions aside, today I want to focus on the gifts that the Wise Men brought – gold, frankincense and myrrh. What I would like to suggest is that these gifts are symbols of the spiritual life.

The first gift was gold, a gift for a king. You have control over certain aspects of your life. To be human means that you have influence over certain things, you rule over your own world. In other words, you have your own kingdom.

The doctor may tell you that you must lose weight, but you control the food you eat and the exercise you get. I have control over the clothes I wear. There are times when Tanya will give me that look – “are you really going to wear that out in public?” But ultimately, I can choose to wear whatever I want. We have control over the things we think about. We can’t always control the thoughts that come into our head, but we can control whether or not we think about those thoughts. Everyone has his own, or her own, kingdom.

Part of growing up is learning to accept the fact that we don’t have complete control. There are some things in life that are out of our control. We can’t control the weather. We can’t control other people. We can’t control disease. Maturity means recognizing those limits. Ultimately, true maturity means allowing Jesus to be our king, giving him control of our lives. Spiritual maturity means recognizing that our kingdom is under his kingdom. The gold that the wise man brought reminds us that Jesus is our king.

In his book, Disappointment With God, Philip Yancey tells a story that Soren Kierkegaard wrote. It is the story of a king who loved a humble maiden. Let me read it to you.

The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all his opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden.

How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his very kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist – no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind. Would she be happy at his side? How would he know?

If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, and equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross over the gulf between them.

For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal. (Yancey p103-104)

The king knew that the only way he could truly have this maiden’s love was to let go of his kingliness. So he clothed himself in rags, took on a new identity, and came to her cottage as a beggar.

That, my friends, is the incarnation. Jesus is God, the heavenly king. And yet he is so madly in love with us that he let go of his divinity, gave up his power as king to come down and live with us so that we might fall in love with him. Yet, at the same time, he is still the king who loves us and wants our love, as well as our obedience and our worship.

The second gift is frankincense. During my freshman year in college I was in the concert choir. We went on tour and sang at a Roman Catholic church. It was a high mass. The priest had this little metal thingy, with smoke coming out of it, that he waved back and forth. Within a few moments a smell filled the room. Right after that we had to sing. It was tough because I was gagging on the smell and the smoke. That was the first time I had ever smelled incense.

In both the Old and New Testament there are two different words that are translated incense. One is usually translated as incense and the other as frankincense. Both of them describe items that are burned in worship. Sometimes it is an animal that is sacrificed and burned. Other times it is a mixture of sap from a tree and a variety of spices. In either case the idea is that something is burned, which creates smoke that rises up to heaven as an offering. There are at least two ideas that come out of this.

First, the smoke that rises up to heaven is intended as a pleasing smell to God. As I said, I don’t particularly like the smell of incense, but the smell of a good steak on a barbeque, or cookies baking in the oven – those are smells I can appreciate. I can imagine the smell of an animal that has been sacrificed and is burning as pleasing to God. The question for us is, “What can we do that is pleasing to God? What can we do that makes God happy?” Let me mention a few ideas:

Worship – your attendance at worship is pleasing to God. The fact that you are here makes God happy. It is also an encouragement to the rest of us. I don’t know if you realize how much easier it is to preach when this room is full. But beyond that, you have sacrificed your time. You could have slept in. The fact that you are here is pleasing to God.

Obedience – God is happy when we are obedient to his will for our lives. It makes God smile when we do what we are supposed to do.

Giving – God rejoices when we are willing to trust him with our finances, when we are willing to give back to him what he gave to us in the first place.

Thanksgiving – God is pleased when we say thank you, recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God. What can you do, what will you do, that is pleasing to God?

There is a second idea that incense points to. The third verse of We Three Kings starts like this: “Frankincense to offer have I: Incense owns a Deity nigh.” This is a poetic way of saying that God is near. In the Old Testament incense was only allowed to be offered by the High Priest. In fact, two of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, were killed because they offered incense when they shouldn’t have. The priest, especially the High Priest, was the one who closest to God and who connected people to God. He offered the sacrifices that allowed people to have a relationship with God. The incense given to Jesus reminds us that he is our High Priest, who makes it possible for us to be near to God. Through Jesus we can come in to God’s presence, we have a relationship with God. That is the good news of the incense.

The third gift is myrrh. Myrrh is the gooey stuff that comes out of the bark of a particular tree. The Hebrew word for myrrh comes from a root that can be translated as bitter – it probably had a bitter taste and can be bitter smelling. The Hebrew word can also be translated as grief, which is a very bitter experience. Myrrh was often used as an embalming substance to wrap around the body of a person who had died. After Jesus died Nicodemus brought myrrh to put on Jesus’ body as he wrapped it in the burial cloths.

Myrrh reminds us that Jesus is not only the high priest who brings us close to God. He is also the sacrifice for our sins, who makes it possible for us to be forgiven and to come into the presence of God. Myrrh reminds us that Jesus died for our sins. Even at Christmas we must not forget the cross.

Down in Brazil there is a prison run on Christian principles of love. There are two full-time staff. All of the rest of the work is done by the inmates. People who are not in the prison volunteer to adopt a prisoner. They visit the prisoner while he is in the prison, and help him after he gets out. Chuck Colson, who was very involved in prison ministries, went to visit the prison. Let me read to you his description of what happened.

When I visited the prison I found the inmates smiling – particularly the murderer who held the keys, opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with Biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs…. My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key in the lock, he paused and asked, “Are you sure you want to go in?”

“Of course,” I replied impatiently, “I’ve been in isolation cells all over the world.” Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the inmates – the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross.

“He’s doing time for the rest of us,” my guide said softly. (*Chuck Colson, quoted in “In the Grip of Grace” by Max Lucado, p113*)

Jesus is doing time for all of us. He died for you and for me, so that we might be forgiven, so that we might live, so that we might be near to God. Even during the Christmas season we must never forget that Jesus died for us.

The Wise Men brought their gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh, reminding us that Jesus is our King who rules our lives, Jesus is our High Priest who brings us near to God, and Jesus is our Sacrifice who died for our sins. Let us stand, remembering the Wise Men and their gifts, celebrating the gifts that Jesus gives to us.