

The Greatest Gift

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The Holy Scripture as we learn to live by it. Amen.
Scripture Matt 2:13-23

As many of you know, some denominations, when reciting the Lord's Prayer use the term, "Trespass" instead of "Debt" as we do. There was once a family who was in the midst of making pre-Christmas preparations the night before the big day. Their young son was being a bit rambunctious with all the excitement and so the mother decided it was time for him to go to bed early. He did as was asked and the father, as he passed by the boy's bedroom door, heard the little fellow saying his prayers. He said, "And forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

Indeed. Although his words implied a misunderstanding of Christmas, we should ask ourselves what is Christmas really about? The reflexive answer is to say it is about Jesus. Yes, it is, from an obvious perspective. But it is really about you and me; and many others whom God used to carry out His will. Let's face it, Christmas is the beginning of Christianity and it almost died before it started, except that God used people to perform His will. And finally, yes, it is about gifts.

We all know the story of the three wise men. The visit by the Magi is a beautiful story and it has been expanded, changed, edited and made legend so much that the real story is often hidden. But in the rush of the season, folks do not spend much time wondering about these three fellows who showed up to honor Jesus.

Some say the Magi were from Arabia because of the nature of their gifts. Things such as incense were abundant in Arabia. Most folks say they were from Persia. Actually, the Magi were from part of an area called Media which was controlled by the Persians. The Medes were once one of four major powers that overcame the Babylonians. Then along came the Persian Empire and Media was swallowed up.

So, because of the dispersion of the Jews, Jewish culture had an influence on the Magi. Remember, cultures do overlap and spillover when they mix. For instance, where's the best place to get good Mexican food? San Antonio, Texas!! The Mexican culture definitely spilled over into that city. So, the Magi were guided by the spillover of Hebrew thinking of the highest level.

The Magi were a tribe previously known as magicians and astronomers and later considered to be priestly, like the tribe of Levi. Much of the story of the Magi is legendary and we know how legends can be distorted. Some ancient historians said as many as twelve came to see Jesus, but tradition has become satisfied with just three. So often we see nativity scenes that include shepherds and wise men. But they were not there with the shepherds. In fact it was almost two years later that they came. How did they know about Jesus? During the dispersion of the Jews, a large element of Hebrews with their customs, culture and prophecies ended up in Media and the Magi became aware of them. One of these prophecies came from Numbers 24:17, which said, "A star will rise out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel." So, there we have a mention of a star. But the big one came from the words of the prophet Micah. Micah 5:2 says,

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

Sometimes short phrases in scripture escape our notice. Remember earlier in the same chapter of Matthew it said, “When Herod heard this he was disturbed and all of Jerusalem with him.” All of Jerusalem? I wonder why? What were they afraid of? The Jews had been looking for a messiah. But, not like this; three foreigners dressed in strange looking garb and riding camels? Maybe they were afraid of Herod and what he might do. Herod had been known for his occasional generosity in his younger years. But in his older years, he became suspicious of everyone and everything. He was a loose cannon with a short fuse, a murderous man. He had killed his wife, his wife’s mother, and two of his own sons. He had a reputation for going ballistic when things upset him. Even the Roman Emperor, Augustus, said it was safer to be Herod’s pig than to be Herod’s son.

So, what else do we know of Herod? He was not 100% Jew, although he had converted to Judaism. By heritage, he was an Edomite. But, Herod had found favor with Rome, so he was given the post in Jerusalem. In spite of his wickedness, all Rome wanted was someone who could control the people. And so, Herod is disturbed and the people are worried. Maybe the people in Jerusalem were too scared to act on the scriptures; too scared of a crazy, murderous king.

But, Herod had a choice. He could proceed as the scriptures tell us he did, or he could stop and examine the scriptures as the Magi had done.

What about us? Do we have a choice? Have we let the Christmas glitter so overshadow the baby Jesus that we risk making the same choice that Herod made?

At Christmas time, what are we afraid of? Are we afraid of making a statement? Compare us to the Magi, who came from a long distance after having read the Hebrew scripture and waited for the signs to be right. They had all kinds of reasons to not make this trip. They were not Hebrew, we have no record they worshiped the God of Israel, but they knew something significant was happening; something cosmic, something heavenly, something life changing.

Which brings us to our scripture for today. Why did the Magi listen to the angel warning them to not return to Herod? It was not about their king. The angel warned them in a Hebrew context; that is, it was a Hebrew King they should protect. What did they care? Somehow, they knew this child was important. And the gifts they left were symbolic. They read more than just scriptures about a star.

Gold is the metal of Kings. It represents royalty, precious value.

Frankincense was used in temple worship and sometimes mixed with oil to anoint priests of Israel.

Myrrh, a spice used in embalming, was given as an act of faith, maybe because they knew of his suffering to come.

All three gifts contain elements of prophecy. Perhaps they had an idea of what was in store for him. For us, Christmas is a happy time, but back then it was the beginning of a story with a foreboding element in it. Perhaps at the time of his birth, there should have been a shadow of a cross behind the manger.

After the Magi had left, Joseph is told to flee to Egypt with the baby and Mary.

We need to pause for a moment and look at the big picture. God works His will in revealing ways. Think of Joseph. He wanted to quietly disown Mary. Today, how many stories do we know of people who say they never knew their father because he left before or shortly after the baby was born. How many fatherless children do we have in our society? And Joseph has that same opportunity, but God told him not to. No, he is instructed to remain loyal to Mary, and now he's told to flee to protect the child, and he does. And if we believe the scripture, this child is not even his! So, we have three pagans and Joseph, the bystander, all involved in following instructions without knowing their actions are making sure that the future ministry of Christ will be carried out. God was using humans to carry out His will. Their humanness was the one thing they had in common.

It is the same as with the authors of the bible. Scripture did not just fall out of heaven; God tasked humans to write it. And when God saw it was time to come to earth to be with us, He did not come in a fiery chariot with trumpets blaring. He came as a human, something we could comprehend. In John's Gospel, Jesus feeds the crowd, but it started with a small boy who brought a trivial amount of bread and fish to the disciples. God used

the boy's generosity. God uses human tools, even today; maybe I should say, especially today.

So we should see the contrast between the Magi, who apparently came with honorable intentions from a pagan society, and the Hebrew nation in which Jesus was flatly rejected. From John 1:11, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

There is a story entitled, "Gifts of the Magi" by William Sydney Porter under the pen name of O' Henry. I found a narrated summary of this story and I would like to read it to you.

Mr. James Dillingham ("Young Jim") and his wife, Della, are a couple living in a modest apartment. They have only two possessions between them in which they take pride: Della's beautiful long, flowing hair, almost to her knees, and Jim's shiny gold watch, which had belonged to his father and grandfather.

On [Christmas Eve](#), with only \$1.87 in hand, and desperate to find a gift for Jim, Della sells her hair for \$20 to a nearby hairdresser named Madame Sofronie, and eventually finds a [platinum pocket watch](#) fob chain for Jim's watch for \$21. Satisfied with the perfect gift for Jim, Della runs home and begins to prepare [pork chops](#) for dinner.

At 7 o'clock, Della sits at a table near the door, waiting for Jim to come home. Unusually late, Jim walks in and immediately stops short at the sight of Della, who had previously prayed that she was still pretty to Jim. Della then admits to Jim that she sold her hair to buy him his present. Jim gives Della her present – an assortment of expensive hair accessories (referred

to as “The Combs”), useless now that her hair is short. Della then shows Jim the watch chain she bought for him, to which Jim says he sold his watch to get the money to buy her combs. Although Jim and Della are now left with gifts that neither one can use, they realize how far they are willing to go to show their love for each other, and how priceless their love really is.

The story ends with the narrator comparing the pair's mutually sacrificial gifts of love with those of the [Biblical Magi](#). It is a wonderful ending:

The magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the new-born [King of the Jews](#). They 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. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the Magi.

What did this young couple risk? What did the Magi risk? What did Joseph and Mary risk? What do we risk?

No matter how God gets it done, with people as His tools or by unexplained miracles, God's purpose will be achieved.

Scriptures confirm this.

From Isaiah 55:10-11, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seeds for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

God's will shall always be done and by His methods, oftentimes using people as His tools.

And the greatest gift of all comes from the Son of the living God, and that gift has a voice. It tells us that we are gifts to each other; to love, to serve, to make sacrifices and take risks.

Amen