



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

December 31, 2023

The First Baby Shower, Epiphany

Recap of sermon from December 31, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the visitation by the magi is one that is both well known and widely misunderstood. We focus on the three wise men bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Various called Three Wise Men, Three Kings, or Three Magi, the Biblical story actually never numbers them. Syrian churches often put the number at 12. The Greek word to describe them in Matthew is *magos*, which has the same root as our English word *magician*. There is other etymological reason to believe they were Zoroastrian, an ancient religion from Persia that had deep astrological roots and knowledge of the stars.

We are fascinated by their story. They are often presented in art and nativity sets with diverse skin tones, reflecting that they represent the entire Gentile world. We see them as idyllic poses and ornate clothing.

On Sunday I had the kids bring the three figurines of our Nativity Scene closer to the baby Jesus. They have traveled across the sanctuary since Advent, placed at first on the far side of the chancel, nearer to the baptismal font. But the pretty white ceramic figures with serene poses betrays the a more fearful truth behind the magi. They served a dual purpose to protect the Holy Family from two grave dangers.

The first danger came from King Herod. The false King who was propped up by Empire and ruled with a ruthlessness that shocked even Rome. Herod the Great built the Second Temple into one of the great wonders of the world. Yet he was so brutal that when he died, Rome split his kingdom into three parts to loosen his grip on power.

When he heard that a new king was born in Bethlehem, he tried to use the magi to eliminate the baby messiah. When they thwarted his plan to kill the baby, he ordered the death of all the sons of Bethlehem. It was a policy of terror that paralleled the Pharaoh in Exodus, but Jesus and his family were able to escape to Egypt and return once Herod the Great was dead.

As Matthew tells the story, they survived their time in Egypt and eventually settled as immigrant refugees in Nazareth. The Magi's swift misdirection thwarted Herod and kept baby Jesus and his family safe.

The second great danger the family faced was Mary's own mortality. Childbirth was a dangerous endeavor. Her survival, especially as a woman who was probably younger than healthy childbearing age, was not guaranteed.

And here the gifts of the magi are telling. Many describe the gifts of the magi in symbolic or theological terms. The gold was a gift for royalty. The frankincense was a gift for a deity—the burning incense was an act of worship in many Temples. Myrrh was a gift for anointing – both for the Messiah (which literally means *anointed one*) and for the dead. Myrrh was used as an anointing oil for dead bodies, thus foreshadowing Jesus' fate on the cross.



The Three Magi, Byzantine mosaic, c. 565. Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy (restored during the 19th century). Courtesy, Wikimedia.

I suggest however, that the gifts were less symbolic and more practical. Gold to fund their escape. Frankincense to help calm mother and child. The burning of incense could soothe the anxiety of a postpartum woman and help her find rest. Myrrh, an essential oil, has been used by natural healers for centuries. It is still marketed for its healing properties and used especially by postpartum women.

All three gifts were not so much directed at Jesus, but were given to help Mary heal from the incredible ordeal of giving birth. The visitation by the Magi was shrouded in fear and violence. The threat of Herod and the threat of childbirth were both aided by the gifts.

This is why we had our “Baby Shower for Mary.” It was a chance to honor Jesus and Mary by bringing gifts to women who are still under the shroud of fear and violence.

Women in our own community are threatened by violence. They are threatened by their partners, poverty, addiction, and other forms of violence. The gifts we brought today may not have symbolic meaning, but they will serve a practical purpose. By supporting Family Resources we are supporting the Marys of today who are threatened by the Herods in their life. Learn more about Family Resources by going to <http://famres.org>. Their abuse counseling, shelter, and other services bring hope to so many. Our gifts, like the gifts of the Magi, helped bring hope to a Mary and child today.

Next Sunday:
Confirmation Sunday, Galatians 6:2