

Characters of Christmas: The Wise Men

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[0 : 00] This morning as we continue in the season of Advent, you see a wreath and candles up front. And each candle has a significance. And so far on each Sunday of the Advent season, we've recognized one of the four attributes that Jesus brings us.

Hope, peace, and joy. And our final Advent candle that we light this morning is the candle of love. So Pastor Kent, what's with the white one in the middle?

We'll get there on Christmas Eve. The following scripture verses may sound familiar, so we're going to hear them twice in two different translations. The first time is in the New International Version, or NIV.

And the second time you'll be hearing the Message translation. And listen for the call to love in these words. Matthew 22, verses 36 to 40 says, Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in all the law?

Jesus replied, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

[1 : 12] And a second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. And now again from the Message.

Teacher, which command in God's law is the most important? Jesus said, Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.

This is the most important. The first on any list. But there's also a second to set alongside it. Love others as well as you love yourself.

These two commands are pegs, the Message says. Everything in God's law and the prophets hangs from them. So as Leah mentioned a little bit, our special guest, Noel Sayers will be picking up our sermon series in the story on December 29th.

While I'm away. And then Pastor Luwam will be preaching in the series as well on January 5th. So with both those gentlemen, you're in good hands. And I'm looking forward to listening to those sermons from afar.

[2 : 29] I'd also like to take a moment this morning to mention our beautiful nativity scene that's above the west entrance. I don't know if you've noticed it.

And you may not know this, but this was handcrafted with love by Bill Giddey. And we fondly remember him through that. It greets me every morning when I come to work and it's quite special. So this morning we're concluding our series on the characters of Christmas as we look at the circumstances of the birth of Jesus from the perspective of some of the key people who are directly involved.

And for those of you who know me and have heard me talk about this before, the Christmas season, Rita and I share this, it's one of my favorite times of the year. My absolute favorite. When I was growing up and living with my parents, I always loved that my mom kept other people in mind. Really not just at Christmas all year. That's the kind of person she was. But at Christmas in particular, my mom always wanted to know what made the season special to us.

[3 : 37] She would say, her words were, what's Christmas to you? So the little things that would make us, make it special, make it magical. So what treats did we like?

Christmas oranges, it's still something I can't resist. Those little foil chocolate coins, we would get those in our stockings. One of my brothers always liked a tin of smoked oysters in his stocking at Christmas time.

I think he was adopted. But to this day, there are still things that were meaningful to me then that still make the season extra special.

I must confess, I will confess before you this morning, a glass of eggnog really, really does it for me. Especially when everyone else has gone to bed.

I like to sneak to the fridge and sitting in a dark room where it's only the lights of the Christmas tree. And I also love, love, love singing Christmas carols.

[4 : 38] On Friday the 13th, this is an interesting coincidence to me, Friday the 13th, a group of 13 hearty carolers, 13 on the 13th, braved that cold night and we went caroling in some of the neighborhoods not far from our church.

It was a lot of fun to see the surprise and joy on people's faces as we sang for them. We stood at intersections and people would stop and roll down their windows and wait and listen and clap and smile.

And as a former AMA guy, I kept saying, we shouldn't be doing this. We should not be. We're going to cause a crap. We shouldn't. But we did it anyway and it was awesome. Do you have a favorite Christmas carol?

Other favorites? Jingle Bell Rock doesn't count. Although it's up there. Over the past few weeks, we have sung some of my favorites and we'll sing others during our Christmas Eve service that will be right here Tuesday at 6 p.m.

Shameless plug. Bring people with you. Let's fill this place. So for me, I think We Three Kings is probably one of my favorites.

[5 : 54] So to me, it was fitting that we conclude our Christmas sermon series, Characters of Christmas, today by looking at the wise men. And so let's begin by looking at what the Bible says in Matthew 2, verses 1 to 2.

Let's read this together. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. The Magi, the wise men. We have a well-known Christmas carol about these guys, but we actually know very little about them.

Only, of the four Gospels, only Matthew mentions them at all. And so, while we traditionally call them wise men, they're also often known as Magi.

The word Magi, here's my language research brain kicking in, the word Magi comes from the Greek word Magos, where we get the English words magic and mage.

[7 : 13] And a mage is another word for wizard. Magos actually comes from a Persian word that is Magupati. I don't know if I'm pronouncing it well, anyone who knows Persian.

So that was a title given to priests in a sect of ancient Persian religions. Scholars suggest that these guys, these Magi, would have been astrologers of some kind.

Men who looked to the sky and read the stars for insight into significant events. But it's also important to recognize that back then, you know, we hear astrology and we think, oh, horoscopes, yikes, oh, that's terrible.

And you're not wrong. But it's important to recognize that back then, astronomy, study of the stars, and astrology, looking for signs in the stars, were part of the same overall studies.

So they went hand in hand with one another. The mystical and the practical were considered harmonious. So maybe faith and science can learn something from one another again one day.

[8 : 24] The Magi would have followed the patterns of the stars religiously. Pardon the pun. Scholars suggest that they probably would have been very wealthy and held in high esteem.

They would have been aristocracy. And they would have been held in high esteem not only by people of their own country, but people who weren't from their religion or country.

They would have been that level of status. Where did the Magi come from? Your mind likely jumps to the Orient, right?

That's what the Christmas carol taught us. That must be right. We probably all agree, I think, that that's a fairly generic term. And possibly even politically correct at this point.

Incorrect, sorry. So it's been suggested that these men would have come from an area which is now either Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or the Yemen.

[9 : 26] So that particular region. How many were there? I don't know about you, but every nativity set I've ever seen, including the one in my living room, has three wise men.

No more, no less. Just the three. Right? And that old beloved carol confirms it. We three kings. That's it. Just three.

But scripture, have a look, never confirms a number. Or ever even implies that they were kings in our traditional understanding of that.

So how did we ever arrive at these assumptions? Christians. It's possible, as I touched on, that they may have been royalty. They were certainly aristocratic and wealthy.

And some have suggested that their identification as kings in later Christian writings may be linked to Psalm 72 verse 11 where a Bible prophecy says, may all kings bow down before him.

[10:32] But how did we ever land on the idea that there were three? Any thoughts? Oh, you smarty pantses.

Matthew 2, 11, let's read this together. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So there you have it. Three gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Must have been three magi, right? Eh, not necessarily, but it's definitely a comfortable assumption that we've made for centuries.

And it's probably okay. But did you catch something else in the verse, that passage that we just read together? I hope it doesn't make you question your nativity scene.

[11:31] that you have set up at home. We just read at the beginning of that passage, on coming to the house. Wait, what?

So wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute, back up. Didn't the magi visit Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem with the livestock and there was shepherd, there's a shepherd there, three wise men lined up strategically here like I have in my nativity set.

Mary Joseph, got to be in the middle, Jesus looking like a very North American, Canadian kind of child in the middle. And they presented their gifts to Jesus in the manger, didn't they?

See, that's another assumption that we've made. Because we could traditionally, I'm convinced, we could traditionally condense the timeline of those early years of Jesus' life into one starry night, right?

We just go lump. Scholars suggest that, hold on to your hats, kids, Jesus was probably one or two years old when the magi found him.

[12:46] They traveled a long way. There was no Concorde. There was no Uber. They walked. And by this time, Joseph and Mary were, scholars suggest, married, living in a house and intending to stay in Bethlehem for a while.

You may remember that I mentioned during our sermon last week that Herod would continue to play a significant role in this story. Do you remember me saying that? During the time of King Herod.

Do you remember that from our sermon last week, that phrase? Herod was the king at the time Jesus was born. And he played a significant role as well in the story of the magi.

The Bible says in Matthew 2 verse 3, let's read this together. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Remember, Herod was an extremely paranoid man who saw conspiracy and potential threats around every corner. We can imagine that by his nature, Herod caused conflict and stress for others whenever something bothered him personally.

[14:09] Hence that, all Jerusalem was bothered with him. Seems to have been a bit of a drama king, doesn't he? So now a group of complete strangers have come to him with the news of a Messiah.

That's exciting news, right? Not if you're Herod. King of the Jews, that's my title. Herod was shrewd and intelligent.

And remember, Herod himself was given that title, King of the Jews, by the Romans. So if we put together the pieces of Herod's paranoia and a very real threat to his power and influence, not to mention the idea that this child could be the Messiah himself, not good for him.

And we read that Herod was disturbed, probably putting it mildly. And remember that as well, during this time, historians note that Herod was experiencing serious issues, health issues, that affected him mentally and physically.

Herod would have had many advisors and scholars at his disposal, and we read in Matthew 2, 4-6. Let's read this together. chapter 1-6. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

[15 : 47] In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

For out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel. Imagine all the things that were going through Herod's mind at this point.

Herod was not of the line of David. So if a baby were found to be of that line, that child would be the rightful heir to the throne.

Herod's days from that point would be numbered. And remember that Herod was paranoid and suspicious of everyone. We talked about it last week.

Even his own family members. He had his wife and his sons killed. He recognized that the Jews were waiting for a Messiah. And the last thing that he wanted was for the Jewish people to rally around a religious figure who was also the rightful heir.

[17 : 06] What a nightmare for him. Some scholars have also suggested that the fact that the Magi may have been of Jewish descent from an area outside of Rome.

They suggest that. And that Herod may then have perceived that these Magi would have welcomed a balance of power swayed away from Rome by a rightful Jewish heir.

We can imagine Herod's paranoia and anger were being whipped into a frenzy at this point. And all thanks to this message perceived and delivered with joyful anticipation by the Magi.

But Herod managed to come up with a plan. The Bible says in Matthew 2, 7-8, let's read this together. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, go make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.

[18 : 25] Dispatched to Bethlehem by an agitated and paranoid king who was very specific about what he wanted. He asked for a careful search.

He asked for an immediate report back on where to find the baby. Doesn't sound much like a baby shower, does it? Careful search, immediate report.

Sounds like espionage. have you ever considered the significance of each of the gifts the magi presented to Jesus?

I don't know about you, but I've known this story for about as long as I can remember and I never once stopped to think, gee, these gifts seem awful strange to give to a baby, don't they?

I think I've always just assumed that they were valuable. They were immensely valuable. They were rare. These were gifts fit for a king.

[19 : 29] Gifts that in a very limited way seem to be intended to reflect the value of the gift that God had just given to humanity.

The magi presented gifts to Jesus. And while these gifts may have seemed strange to give to a young child, Christians for centuries have seen the following significance in them.

And perhaps this is familiar to you or not. Gold was presented to Jesus associated with great value and often royalty.

A precious gift presented to the king of kings. Frankincense. I remember as a kid thinking frankincense sounded like Frankenstein and I still can't get that out of my head.

That was the only way I could remember the word. Frankincense. Have you ever wondered what that actually is? Don't feel bad. I wasn't completely sure either so I needed to look it up.

[20 : 38] I needed to refresh my memory. Do you recognize though another word that's embedded in that one? Incense. that's right. Frankincense is actually an aromatic resin that's used in incense and perfume.

And it's produced by a specific variety of trees. It's been traded on the Arabian Peninsula for more than 6,000 years.

It's burned as a part of worship in some churches. Jesus. And its significance as a gift to the newborn Jesus was to me it signified that he would be worshipped.

And are you familiar with myrrh? It's another form of resin. Believe it or not, they liked their resin.

And it's extracted from another specific type of tree that is very small and thorny.

And it's been used throughout history as perfume, incense, and even medicine. In the Gospel of Mark, we learn that Jesus was offered wine with myrrh in it while he was on the cross, likely to ease his pain.

[22 : 03] wine. In the Gospel of John, we learn that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea used a mixture of myrrh and aloe in the process of wrapping Jesus' body for burial.

Like Mary, Jesus' mother, who we were reminded in our sermon about her a few weeks ago, Mary was the only person present for Jesus' earthly ministry from cradle to grave.

These precious elements, these kingly gifts, were significant in framing Jesus' humanity. These were human gifts given to a human baby.

But the significance and meaning behind these gifts clearly indicate this was no ordinary human baby. God's love.

This part of the Christmas story provides us with so many contrasting perspectives. As we considered in our sermon last week, Herod saw the coming of the Messiah as representing everything he had to lose.

[23 : 21] Jesus. And the magi fell to their knees recognizing this child, this Jesus, as worthy of everything they had to give him.

My hope is that through this series, Characters of Christmas, you've come to see this old, old story from a new perspective, and that you've been challenged in some of your personal assumptions about how God sees you, and how God can and will use you if you let him.

The same Jesus who was born so long ago in Bethlehem, whose earthly father was a humble carpenter who risked everything he had to trust God, whose poor young mother overcame her fears and questions to trust God.

This baby whose birth could not be stopped, even by one of the most powerful and influential rulers of his time.

That baby who is worshipped by at least three foreign dignitaries. That baby now reigns as the king of kings, not only at his birth, but now and forever more.

[25 : 06] For many of you, the story of Christmas is an old and familiar one. one that brings you comfort and assurance of your relationship with Jesus and with God, your heavenly father.

But if this story is still new to you, or if it's one that you feel personally not really connected to in a real way, please come and speak with me, because I'd like to tell you.

The miraculous birth of Jesus is a miracle that can change your whole world, your whole life.

Merry Christmas. Father God, thank you for Christmas. Thank you for what it means to us, not just today, not just this Wednesday, but what it can mean for every day of our lives, if we'll let it.

And so, Father, I pray your blessing on each one of us as this story becomes more clear, more real, more personal, through the power of your spirit, through the life of your son, and through the love you give us as our heavenly father.

[26 : 33] We pray these things in your name. Amen.