



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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The Magi's Helpers

Every year we hear how magi traveled from afar to visit the Christ child. Because there are three gifts given to the baby, we assume there were three magi – and legend has provided us their names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Since we are dealing with legend, today I'd like to add a few more details to this story. For example, I'm sure that the magi didn't travel on their own to Bethlehem. Maybe they thought this trip would be a good learning experience for their own kids. So imagine each magi brought a son or daughter along on this adventure to help with the camels, to sort out the supplies, and then to see the infant king to whom they were being led by the wandering star. I can well imagine that when the caravan arrived in Bethlehem, the magi's children, being children, were anxious to buy a souvenir they could bring back home. The magi told them to first pay homage to the newborn king and then they could visit the souvenir shop that just happened to be conveniently located around the corner from the stable.

When Gaspar first approached the stable in Bethlehem, he thought how different this setting was from King Herod's palace back in Jerusalem. There were no soldiers or guards here; no throne rooms with huddled groups of advisors, scribes, and priests. When the magi had asked "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?", Herod's eyes had widened and revealed the fear he felt, even if his stony face was unmoved by their question. When his scribes read aloud the ancient prophecy about a ruler being born in Bethlehem only a few miles away, it struck Gaspar as odd that these same religious scholars expressed no interest in coming to see for themselves whether the scriptures had finally come true. Herod ordered the magi to go to Bethlehem and report back on what they found. But it was a command issued without curiosity, hope or love. The magi were led out of the palace, past the gold candelabras and bright torches, escorted once more into the night. And as they resumed their journey, it was hard to say which group dwelt in darkness and which was truly in the light.

Anyway, Gaspar and his daughter were the first to enter the stable in Bethlehem. They knelt in homage before the manger and presented a chest of gold for the Christ child. After a while, Gaspar's daughter quietly got up and went to the souvenir stand. Looking over the available options in the shop and not wanting to burden the camels any further, the wise young girl decided she would pick out a bumper sticker – not to put on the camel, but perhaps to stick onto the chest strapped behind Gaspar's saddle. She too remembered the visit to Herod's palace. She too had seen the soldiers and the golden throne room, the man seated on a throne who had seemed cruel and unwelcoming. Then

she pictured once more the humble child lying in the manger bed, and with that chose a bumper sticker that said this: *If Jesus is Lord, someone else isn't.*

The next to enter the stable was Melchior with his young son. They brought the gift of frankincense – a rare perfume whose scent was considered fit for the gods. Melchior was the star scholar, the astronomer who spent countless nights studying the celestial dance of the heavens. He had always believed that others paid far too much attention to earthly matters – focusing on armies and treasure and passing fads. Melchior believed that an awareness of how small we are in the universal scheme of things was needed to help keep our lives in perspective. Anyone who studied the stars and planets knew that a being greater than us had designed this world and set it in motion. Knowing that we are not in control, but that God is, was the first step toward true wisdom. What Melchior shared with his son, as they rode together for so many miles, was that if the Holy One who set the stars in motion sends you a sign – a new star that lights up the evening sky and compels you to follow where it leads – why on earth would you choose to ignore that? God is the source of life and all goodness; why wouldn't you go where you are led? Yes, it might take work and discipline. It might mean a long journey that others will question and at times you'll doubt yourself. But following stars is an act of the heart and soul, and life is too short not to choose to follow a star.

Melchior's entrance was preceded by the wafting scent of the gift he carried. The frankincense caused the Holy Family to look up and breathe in deeply, reverently. Joseph asked Melchior if he had traveled far, to which Melchior silently nodded. After a while, the boy slipped off to leave them alone and to visit the souvenir store himself. He too wisely chose a bumper sticker – one which said this: *To follow a star means changing courses.*

Balthasar had waited to be the last with his gift. He brought myrrh, another fragrant resin. It could be used as a perfume or an ointment to heal wounds. But for those who could afford it, it was also a spice placed in burial chambers to cover the stench of death. Balthasar had felt uneasy ever since they had left Herod's palace. He didn't trust Herod and had felt a strong conviction they should not return to Jerusalem when this visit was over. Everything about that palace, including the pretender on the throne, smelled to him of death that no amount of myrrh could cover up. A violent spirit filled Herod's palace – and Balthasar knew how risky it was to bring bad news back to anyone clinging to power.

All this made him sad as he knelt before the Christ child. He knew his gift offered a mixed message – a rare resin that can heal that was also a perfume associated with the grave. Yet in his heart he knew this was the right gift to give. Mary accepted the gift from Balthasar. She seemed to understand the double meaning of the myrrh he presented, for when their eyes met, he knew she knew.

Balthasar's daughter had followed him into the stable. She was the youngest of the three helpers, but in some way, she had the wisest spirit. After a while, she left the stable and met up with the others in the souvenir stand. Something now felt different to this group of three helpers. They realized that from now on they would be traveling without a star, for a new and different light would be guiding them. They sensed for a moment how big the world is and recognized how important every step forward we take actually is. So for the third souvenir, she agreed on a hopeful bumper sticker that said this: *The road away from the manger is always a new one.*

Eventually the entire entourage got back on their camels, after first plotting a route home that didn't pass through Jerusalem. I don't think the magi even noticed the three bumper stickers their children had quietly attached to the chests tied behind the camels' saddles. But the three helpers knew they were there. They thought of them as their own gifts that would accompany them on the long road home.

And, sure enough, every time the caravan stopped and the magi would go off to special tents or places of honor, the children stayed behind. Sometimes the servants in the places they visited would see the three bumper stickers and ask the children about them. What does this mean: *If Jesus is Lord, someone else isn't.* Tell me about this Lord. Or, *why does following a star mean changing courses? Is the path of my life not the correct one?* Or explain this saying: *The road away from the manger is always a new one. How so?* Being wise children, they would tell the others what they had seen, what they had learned, and why it all mattered so very much.

Did they all grow up to be Presbyterian magi who still talk about their Bethlehem bumper stickers? That's a story for another day. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

God of Epiphany light and love, shine upon us once more. In a world of idols and kings, help us follow the true Savior and Lord of life. In our seasons of confusion, change our courses away from fear and doubt and redirect us to your paths of righteousness. And when so much feels the same, shadowy and uncertain, move within us by your Spirit as we arise from kneeling at your manger, so we may go forth in new ways – to be fed at your table, to be encouraged by your grace, and to be made new as we await your coming kingdom. Loving God, mother and father of us all, hear our prayer. AMEN