

GIFTS FOR A KING(DOM): 2. FRANKINCENSE

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Romans 12:1-8

Today I want to continue preaching this sermon series which focuses on the magi, or the wise men. We find the story of the wise man in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew tells us that these travelers came from the east following a star seeking the one who would be born king of the Jews. Their first stop was Jerusalem, because if you're looking for a king then you go to the capital. Herod heard that they were sniffing around town looking for this one who was born king of the Jews and he summoned them to come see him. Herod, of all people, did not want a legitimate Jewish king to be identified because that would threaten his power and wealth. He was king only because the Romans placed him in that position. If the Jews caught wind that there might actually be a king born from the line of the great King David, they would surely revolt...again.

After consulting with the priests and scribes, Herod directs the wise man to go to Bethlehem where the prophets said that a king would be born. They go and find the child Jesus with his mother and father in a house in that village. They paid him homage and they presented him with gifts. Matthew tells us that these gifts are gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is because three gifts are mentioned that we assume that there were three of these wise men. But we really don't know. The men are warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod and so they take another road home from Bethlehem.

These travelers from the east who came looking for the child born king of the Jews we're likely astrologers or priests from Persia. We call them wise men because that was the language of the King James Bible. The Greek uses the word μάγοι, the same word from which we get 'magician.'

These astrologers had identified a star rising into the sky which they associated with a momentous event, the birth of a king. And because the heavens had spoken to them they felt compelled to travel to find this king and to pay him homage.

The gifts they bring are extravagant. They are gifts fit for royalty. And during this three-part sermon series, I am looking at each of these gifts and what they might represent for us. Last week, we looked at the gift of gold. Gold is a valuable metal with wonderful properties. It is shiny and beautiful, and humans have always treasured it. Gold is a gift fit for a king.

The second gift mentioned by Matthew is frankincense. And believe it or not, at the time of the magi, frankincense was more valuable than gold.

So, what is frankincense? Frankincense is an aromatic resin derived from the Boswellia tree, a tree that grows primarily in the Arabian Peninsula. The resin can only be harvested two to three times a year by tapping the tree. Trees can only produce this resin after they are ten years old.

Frankincense has been traded on the Arabian Peninsula for more than 5000 years. It is prized for its aroma as well as for its supposed medicinal properties. It is used as a perfume as well as an incense. It has a sweet, citrusy smell. The Egyptians used frankincense to cleanse body cavities in preparation for mummification. In Persia, it was used to treat diabetes, gastritis, and stomach ulcers. In traditional Chinese medicine, frankincense was believed to relieve pain, treat deafness, and promote blood circulation. Some of you have told me that you use frankincense as a skin lotion.

Frankincense was highly valued, but the trees that produce it grow only in a small area in the southern Arabian Peninsula. According to a Roman historian, the sap of the Boswellia tree made the Arabians the richest people on earth.

Frankincense is responsible for the early trade routes between Arabia, India, the Mediterranean, and the Silk Road in China. Frankincense may have been responsible for the domestication of the camel. At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire was importing some three thousand tons of frankincense each year.

The name frankincense comes from the Old French expression *frank encens*, which means 'high-quality incense.' In Greek, the word for what we call frankincense is λιβανος, a cognate of the name Lebanon. It was given this name because the spice trading route passed by Mount Lebanon. (There's always a Lebanon connection.)

Frankincense gets a special mention in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus as one of four aromatics that were to be ground together and burned in the Tabernacle at the altar of the Ark of the Covenant. It was designated to be a holy offering. As we read in Exodus:

The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum...with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet with you; it shall be for you most holy.

And that is how I would like us to consider frankincense. It is the gift of the magi to the Christ child, and for us, it represents the gift of worship.

Worship is the act of giving praise and adoration and thanksgiving to God through our actions and our attitudes. We worship through prayer; we worship

through song; we worship through giving; but most of all, we worship through our presence.

As we read in the Psalms:

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
(Psalm 95)

Worshipping God is not a part-time endeavor. Worshiping God is not like observing a parade as it goes by. To worship God means that we are in the parade, that we are the parade. Worship demands that we give of our whole selves. Worshiping God means *loving the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might* (Deuteronomy 6:4).

In his great Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul addresses the subject of worship. Paul writes, *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

Paul is calling the Christians in Rome toward a new way of living, a way of living that embodies worship. He calls them to give of themselves as *living sacrifices*. He is not calling them to die as martyrs, but to dedicate their lives to God. He is calling them to redirect their world view and focus on one thing—discerning God's will, *determining what is good and acceptable and perfect*.

As a church, we gather here each week to worship together as a body. We call this our corporate worship. We gather here to be part of the larger body of Christ. We worship together as a witness to the world. We want them to see us, to know why we are here and what we believe in.

But worship should not be limited to Sunday mornings. Worship of God should be part of our whole lives. I hope that each of you has embraced additional ways to worship God beyond the walls of this room—other places where you feel especially close to God. Maybe it is with your family, or maybe it is with nature. Maybe you have a special place next to a stream, or a favorite trail where the barriers between you and the holy have been erased. That is a place where you are in worship.

The magi brought gifts fit for a king to the one the heavens told them was the new king of the Jews. The question I ask in this sermon series is this: What gifts do we bring that are fit for our Christ? What gifts to we bring that demonstrate God's kingdom to the world? The answer is this (it is simple), we bring ourselves in worship.

In the second part of our reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul points out that God has assigned each of us different gifts. We don't all worship God in exactly the same way. We worship in accord with our unique gifts and talents and abilities. Paul writes that some have gifts of prophesy, some ministry, some teaching, some encouraging, some giving, and more. These are our means of worship.

I am continually amazed at the ways that each of you share your gifts through your acts of compassion and love, through your sharing of food, of giving rides, of sending cards and emails, of visiting the sick, through your generosity, and more. These acts are worship.

Today, we recognize those people in our body who have accepted the call to leadership as elders and deacons in Christ's church. For the next three years, this is the way they will worship--drawing upon their God-given gifts to lead this congregation in its worship and service of God.

But they need your prayers each and every day, for the task set before them is challenging. Their duty is to discern God's will for this church. They must measure every action, every decision of the Session or the Diaconate to determine if it reflects God's plan. Their work requires sweat and prayer and humility. Please make every effort to support them in their ministry and keep them in your prayers.

Finally, in this new year, I urge you to re-examine the place of worship in your life. Is your worship of God the center of your being? Is it the hub of all your actions and decisions? Do you worship God with your heart, soul, and might? Is your worship a gift fit for a king?