

**January 4, 2015**

**TEXT: Matthew 2:1-15**

**TITLE: Gifts for the Road**

Every year we hear how three magi traveled from afar to visit the Christ child. History and legend have fleshed out the limited information given to us in Matthew's gospel so that annually we talk about Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Mary's little boy lying in a manger. But today instead of talking about the three wise men, I'd like to talk about some lesser-known characters: the three wise boys. You didn't think the magi from the East were going to take care of their own camels, did you? Each wise man had a servant boy. Sadly, history didn't record their names, but they also traveled from afar and were excited to see the infant king. Being young boys, though, they wanted to bring back something from their long journey. Fortunately there was a souvenir stand around the corner from the stable. But because they had to travel far and needed all the room in the trunks for supplies, the wise men told the boys they could only buy one thing each that was light and easy to pack. The boys agreed, so one by one the magi with his young servant approached the humble dwelling of Joseph, Mary and the Christ child.

Gaspar went first carrying the gift of gold. As he and his servant approached, Gaspar thought how different this setting was from King Herod's halls of power where they had just visited. There were no soldiers and banners here; no thrones or crowns; no huddled groups of court advisors, scribes and priests whispering and jostling to get a good view of the strange visitors from distant lands. Gaspar had knelt before King Herod, but he sensed that the man on the throne was simply that – a man on a throne, nothing more. When they had asked, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod's eyes had widened and betrayed the fear he felt, even if his stony face was unmoved. When the scribes read aloud the ancient prophecy about a ruler being born in Bethlehem only a few miles away, it had struck Gaspar odd that these same religious scholars expressed no interest in coming to see for themselves whether the ancient words had finally come true. Herod then ordered the magi to go to Bethlehem. When the palace door shut behind them and they were cast out in the night, the gold and thrones and power and religious scrolls left inside the palace were all well-lit by torches and silver candelabras. But as the Magi resumed their journey, who was to say which group was in darkness and which group was truly in the light.

Gaspar gently set down his chest of gold and paid homage to the newborn King. Meanwhile Gaspar's servant quietly got up and went over to the souvenir stand. Looking at the available options, and being a very wise boy, he decided that the best choice was a bumper sticker. It was light and he could put it, not on the camel, but on the chest that was strapped behind Gaspar's saddle. Thinking back to their visit in Herod's palace and of the gold now left before an infant king, he chose a bumper sticker that said this: *If Jesus is Lord, someone else isn't.*

Melchior and his servant went next, carrying their gift of frankincense – the rare perfume whose scent was considered fit for the gods. Melchior was the star scholar, the astronomer who had spent countless nights learning the celestial dance of the heavens. He had always felt that others paid far too much attention to earthly matters – armies and borders, vanity, possessions, and passing fancies. Melchior believed an awareness of how small we are in the universal scheme of things was needed to help keep things in perspective. Anyone who had watched the orbits of stars, moons, and planets knew that someone greater than us had designed this world and set it in motion. And if we are not in control but God is, then acknowledging that fact is the first step toward true wisdom. And when the One who sets the stars in motion causes them to change course – to lighten an evening sky with a star so bright that you must follow where it leads – why would we choose to ignore that? If God is life and goodness, why wouldn't we go where we are led? Yes, this takes work. It takes discipline. It takes going against the grain and sometimes wondering on the long journey if you might be mistaken. But following stars is an act of the heart and soul, which is our closest connection to the God of creation – and therefore is always to be trusted.

Melchior's entrance was preceded by the scent of the frankincense he carried. It 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. Melchior's servant slipped off to leave them alone and went to the souvenir stand. Being a wise boy, he too chose a bumper sticker for Melchior's supply chest – one which said this: *To follow a star means changing courses.*

Balthasar had waited to be last with his gift. He brought myrrh, a fragrant resin. It could be used as a perfume. It could be made into an ointment to heal wounds. It could be burnt as incense. But for those who could afford it, it was a spice placed in burial chambers to cover the stench of death. Balthasar had felt uneasy ever since they left Herod's palace. He didn't trust Herod and he had felt a growing conviction they were not to return to Jerusalem when this visit was over. Everything about that place, the advisors, the pretender on the throne had smelled to him of death and no whiff of myrrh could cover it up. A spirit of violence filled Herod's palace – and a spirit of violence seemed about to erupt over the land where they'd been sent. Despite all their wisdom, Balthasar knew how risky it was for magi to tell the truth when such news was bad news for those in power. It made him worried as he knelt before the Christ child. It made him sad to hand over a gift that seemed to offer a mixed message – a resin that can heal as well as a perfume associated with the grave. Yet somehow he knew that was the right gift to give.

Mary was the one who accepted the gift of myrrh from Balthasar. She seemed to understand the dual meaning of the myrrh as she took it from him, for when their eyes met, Balthasar knew she knew.

His servant quietly left them and went over to the souvenir stand. Something had changed. He realized that from now on they would travel without a star but with a new light to guide them. Being a wise boy, he too chose a bumper sticker. His said this: *The road away from the manger is always a different one.*

Eventually the small group got back on their camels, although they had to figure out a new route back to the eastern lands. I don't think the magi even noticed the bumper stickers their wise boys had purchased in Bethlehem. Their focus was on other things and not on the travel chests strapped onto their beasts of burden. But the wise boys knew they were there. They thought of them as their own gifts for the road home.

Every time the caravan would stop and the magi would go off to special tents or royal palaces, the boys would remain behind. Sometimes the servants in the places where they stayed would see the three bumper stickers and ask the wise boys about them. What does this mean: "*If Jesus is Lord, someone else isn't.*" Why does "*following a star mean changing courses?*" Tell us why "*the road away from the manger is always a different one.*" Being wise boys, they would tell the others about what they had seen and what they had learned and why it all mattered.

Did the wise boys grow up to be good Presbyterians who still talk about their Bethlehem bumper stickers? Well, that's a story for another day. Thanks be to God.