

Journey of Surrender Matthew 2:1-12

The Story of the Magi is often left to the Sunday after Christmas. But it has become so entwined with the Christmas story that we don't usually tell one without the other. And, the tradition of gift giving that we do on Christmas morn is based on the giving of gifts my the Magi to the Christ child.

The story is unique to Matthew; no where else in the Bible is there even a reference to Magi who journeyed far to see, acknowledge, and worship the “one who has been born king of the Jews.” Of the story's authenticity there can be no doubt; historical record verifies key elements of the story. But Matthew only gives details he believes are pertinent to the message he wants his readers to know: Jesus came not just for the nation of Israel but for the whole world.

So just who were these visitors who journeyed from the East? For centuries we have speculated about their identity. We like to envision them in colorful and exotic attire, picturing them as monarchs, ambassadors, or astrologers. These visitors had come to Judea – a long and treacherous journey, perhaps from Persia or Arabia – following one point of light in the sky. These “readers of the sky” believed the birth of a new star meant the birth of a new king and, because they had been given privilege to see this astronomical event, it was only proper they give the king homage. But, in the journey to Jesus, they had to surrender much.

Matthew tells us that when the magi arrived, the scene was not the stable but a house. Likely nearly two years had passed since the star was first detected and they had left. Mary and Joseph had situated their little family in a more suitable home. So it was a little later that the three of them came – or was it three? Truthfully we don't know how many came. Matthew tells us there were the three gifts given; so legend has it there were three.

Mysteriously they appeared, and mysteriously they are gone. We are left with many questions about them. Did their encounter with Jesus have any affect on them? We don't know.

For this reason there are many legends regarding these men. I want to share one such legend of the magi with you that shares a spiritual truth: the journey to Jesus is a journey of surrender. The legend is entitled *The Secret of the Gifts* as recorded by Paul Flucke.

The story has been told for centuries now. The Story of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar and the gifts they brought to the newborn king, and of how they saw the star and followed it for weeks, across mountain and valley and desert. In stately procession on their swaying beasts, they came and placed their treasures at the feet of the infant Savior.

And what were their gifts. Ah, you say, everyone knows. They brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So it has been told. But that is not the whole story. Listen to the rest and you shall learn the secret of the gifts.

The first of the three visitors to approach was Caspar. His cloak was of the finest velvet, trimmed in flawless fur. At his throat were clusters of gems, for Caspar was a wealthy man.

Those who watched saw only that he paused at the door. “He prays,” they whispered to one another as they saw Caspar’s lips move. But they were mistaken. They could not see that it was the Angel Gabriel, guarding the holy place, before whom Caspar stopped.

“All who enter must bring a gift,” said Gabriel. “Have you a gift?”

“Indeed I have,” said Caspar, and he held aloft a finely wrought box. It was small, yet so heavy that his arms could hardly raise it. “I have brought bars of the purest gold.”

“Your gift,” said Gabriel somberly, “must be something of the essence of yourself. It must be something precious to your soul.”

“Such I have brought,” answered Caspar confidently, the hint of a smile upon his lips.

“So shall it be,” said Gabriel. And he, too, smiled as he held the door for Caspar to enter.

Caspar advanced a step, and then another. He was just about to kneel and lay his gold before the child when he stopped and stood erect. There in his outstretched hands lay not gold,

but a hammer. Its scarred and blackened head was larger than a man's fist. And its handle was of sinewy wood, as long as a man's forearm. "But, but –" Caspar stammered as he stared, dumbfounded, at the heavy tool.

And then softly, from behind him, he heard the voice of Gabriel, "So shall it be, and so it is," said the angel. "You have brought the essence of yourself. What you hold in your hands is the hammer of your greed. You have used it to pound wealth from those who labor so that you may live in luxury. You have used it to build a mansion for yourself while others dwell in hovels."

And suddenly Caspar knew the truth. Bowed with shame, he turned toward the door to leave. But Gabriel blocked the way. "No, you have not offered your gift."

"Give this?"

Gabriel replied. "This is why you came. And you cannot take it back with you. It's too heavy. Leave it here or it will destroy you."

Once again, Caspar knew the angel spoke the truth. But still he protested. "The hammer is too heavy. Why, the child cannot lift it."

"He is the only one who can," replied the angel.

"But it is dangerous. He might bruise his hands or feet."

"That worry," said Gabriel, "you must leave to heaven. The hammer shall find its place." Slowly Caspar turned to where the Christ child lay. And slowly he placed the ugly hammer at the baby's feet. Then he rose and turned to the door, pausing only for an instant to look back at the tiny Savior before he rushed outside.

The waiting world saw only the smile that wreathed Caspar's face as he emerged. His hands were raised, as though the wings of angels graced his fingers.

Next to step to the door was Melchior. He was not so resplendent as Caspar, for he wore the darker robes of the scholar. But the length of his beard and the furrows in his brow bespoke one who had lived long with the wisdom of the ages. A hush fell over the onlookers as he, too, paused before the door. But only Melchior could see the angel who stood guard. Only Melchior could hear him speak.

“What have you brought?” asked Gabriel.

And Melchior replied, “I bring frankincense, the fragrance of hidden lands and bygone days.”

“Your gift,” cautioned Gabriel as he had done before, “must be something precious to your soul.”

“Of course it is,” retorted Melchior.

“Then enter, and we shall see.” And Gabriel opened the door.

Melchior stood breathless before the scene within. In all his many years of searching for elusive Truth, he had never sensed such a presence as this. He knelt reverently. And from beneath his robe he withdrew the silver flask of precious ointment.

But then he drew back and stared. The vessel in his hand was not silver at all. It was common clay, rough and stained as might be found in the humblest cupboard. Aghast, he pulled the stopper from its mouth and sniffed the contents. Then he leapt to his feet, only to face the angel at the door. “I’ve been tricked,” he said, spitting the words with fury. “This is not the frankincense I brought! This is vinegar!” Melchior snarled as though it were a curse.

“So shall it be, and so it is,” said Gabriel. “You have brought what you are made of. You bring the bitterness of your heart, the soured wine of a life turned grim with jealousy and hate. You have carried within you too long the memory of old hurts. You have hoarded your

resentments and breathed on sparks of anger until they have become as embers smoldering within you. You have sought knowledge. But you have filled your life with poison.”

As he heard these words, Melchior’s shoulders drooped. He turned his face away from Gabriel and fumbled with his robe, as though to hide the earthen jar. Silently he sidled toward the door. Gabriel smiled gently and placed his hand on Melchior’s arm. “Wait,” he said. “You must leave your gift.”

Melchior sighed with a pain that came from deep within him. “How I wish I could! How long have I yearned to empty my soul of its bitterness. You have spoken the truth, my friend. But I cannot leave it here! Not here, at the feet of love and innocence.”

“But you can,” said Gabriel. “And you must, if you would be clean. This is the only place you can *leave* it.”

“This is vile and bitter stuff,” Melchior protested. “What if the child should touch it to his lips?”

“You must leave that worry to heaven,” Gabriel replied. “There is use even for vinegar.”

So Melchior placed his gift before the Savior. And they say that when he came out his eyes shown with the clearest of heaven’s truth.

There was yet one more visitor to make his offering. He strode forward now, his back as straight as a tree, shoulders firm as an oaken beam. He walked as one born to command. This was Balthasar, leader of many legions, scourge of walled cities. Before him, as he grasped it by its handle of polished ebony, he carried a brass-bound box.

A murmur ran through those who watched as they saw him hesitate before the door. “Look,” they whispered, “even the great Balthasar does obeisance before the king who waits within.”

But it was Gabriel who caused the warrior to pause. “Have you a gift?”

“Of course,” answered Balthasar. “I bring a gift of myrrh, the most precious booty of my boldest conquest. Many have fought and died for such as this. It is the essence of the rarest herb.”

“But is it the essence of yourself?” asked Gabriel.

“It is,” replied the general.

“Then come,” said the angel, “and we shall see.”

Even the fearless Balthasar was not prepared for the wave of awe that struck him as he entered. He felt a weakness in his knees and shuffled forward in reverence. Then, bowing until his face was near the ground, he slowly released his grip upon the handle of the box and raised his head and opened his eyes.

What lay before the baby’s feet was his own spear. Its smooth round staff still glistening where the sweat of his palms had moistened it. And the razor edges of its steely tip caught the flickering light of the lamp.

“It cannot be!” Balthasar whispered hoarsely. “Some enemy has cast a spell.”

“That is truer than you know,” said Gabriel softly from behind him. “A thousand enemies have cast their spell on you and turned your soul into a spear. Living only to conquer, you have been conquered. Each battle you win leads you only to another with a foe yet more formidable.”

Balthasar heard the angel’s words and they seemed to echo in the deepest places of his soul. For a moment he hesitated. Then, taking control of himself he reached down and grasped his spear – and turned toward the door. “I cannot leave this here,” he said. “My people need it. We cannot afford to give it up.”

“Are you sure,” asked Gabriel, “that you can afford to *keep* it?”

A long moment passed. Finally Balthasar loosed his grip, and the spear drooped toward the floor. But as he looked at the child, he whispered back, “But here? Is it safe to leave it here?”

The angel released a long-held breath as he whispered back, “This is the only safe place to leave it.”

“But he is a child, and the spear is sharp. It could pierce his flesh.”

“That fear you must leave to heaven,” Gabriel replied.

And they say that Balthasar left calmly, his arms hanging gently at his sides. They say that he walked first to Caspar and Melchior, where they waited, and embraced them as brothers. Then, turning to the others who watched, he went first to one and then the next, enfolding each in his outstretched arms as one greeting beloved friends who he has not seen for a very long time.

But what of their gifts, you ask ... What of the hammer and the vinegar and the spear? Another story tells how they were seen once more, years later, on a lonely hill outside Jerusalem. But do not worry. That is a burden heaven took upon itself, as only heaven can.

Throughout December we have been on a Christmas Journey tonight we come to pay homage to the new-born King of heaven and earth. All who seek to enter the holy place of the presence of God must bring a gift. Have you a gift? Your gift must be something of the essence of yourself. It must be precious to your soul. For, you see, unless we are willing to surrender what is most precious to us we cannot begin worship, we cannot receive the Christ child.

But be prepared. What you think is precious and the essence of yourself is likely something else altogether. It is what caused Jesus to suffer. It is what caused his pain. It is the very thing that put Jesus on the cross. And while it seems wrong, you must leave it. If you will surrender what is truly the essence of yourself, you will find that when you let go you will never be the same. You will be free!

But what of the gifts? Don't worry. That is a burden heaven took upon itself as only heaven can.