

Were a couple of days early, but we are celebrating Epiphany today. As I told the children, that is the day the church commemorates as when the wise Men arrived to see and worship the Baby Jesus, and it is the day in Spain and Latin American countries when children get presents, from the Wise Men.

Don't worry parents and grandparents, we are not going to go through yet another gift-season for kids; we don't live in Spain or Latin America, and I think we are all spent out anyway. I got in trouble about that at another church, when one little girl seized on the idea of yet more gifts, for Epiphany.

The Epiphany part is the realization that Jesus came for all the world, even those far away, as shown by the Three Kings from far away.

The main church hymn for Epiphany is the one we just sang, “We Three Kings.” There were some beautiful versions of it being played on the radio this last December.

And for some reason, there have been quite a few jokes about the three kings and their gifts. The title of this sermon comes from the little book, “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” by Jan Robinson. In that story, the children in the pageant didn't think too much of the myrrh, and substituted a ham. They brought gold, frankincense, and ham as their offerings to the newborn king. Well, their hearts were in the right place.

Then there are all the suggestions in the jokes about other more practical gifts for the Baby Jesus and the Holy Family: blankets, diapers, a casserole so Mary wouldn't have to cook for a while.

And, those of us who have practical tendencies, know that those gifts would have been useful.

But the three kings, the wise men, the Magi, whatever you want to call them, were not thinking that way. They had come seeking the newborn child, believing in him as the Son of God, and hoping to worship him, and pay homage with treasures.

Their attitude was lovely, really. They were honoring him as a fellow king, giving royal gifts. But they found that he wasn't just another king.

The Baby Jesus wasn't a King Herod—a minor king, of a small area—crazy and greedy and power-mad and cruel and vicious. He was the one who, after missing finding the Baby Jesus, had all the other babies in the area killed.

The Baby Jesus wasn't an emperor like Caesar Augustus, in charge of massive amounts of land, and armies, and collecting taxes and so on.

The Baby Jesus wasn't even like the three kings themselves. No, Jesus wasn't born in a palace, to a family of royalty. He wasn't surrounded by earthly treasures, so that the three kings' gifts were just a few of many.

Jesus' birth was marked by a special guiding star, the star of Bethlehem. And we know who creates and arranges the stars, don't we? God Almighty! And with this "natural phenomenon," the three kings made their journey of search and belief.

Jesus was special. His birth was not meant for a small kingdom, or a great empire of conquest, or a lot of fame and fortune.

Jesus was born to be with us—live among humanity, and show us how to do it right! He was and is our perfect example of how God wants us to relate to other people and to God.

As if that wasn't enough, Jesus then made the ultimate gift of himself—he was crucified, dead, buried, and resurrected so that all who believe in him will have forgiveness of sins, salvation, and life eternal in heaven.

This was a special newborn king!

Jesus was different than earthly kings, then and now. Jesus was the Son of God. Even at his birth, he was to be responded to as the wise men did: in reverence, and worship. "They knelt down and paid him homage."

I found a story which you will like, by Jo-Ann Jennings, about one of the king's perspectives on this event.

The ancient man who sat atop his camel in the middle of the desert was preposterous. His bushy gray beard was as big as the bejeweled cloth crown that he wore on his head, and his portly body was woven together with clever magic, decorating the rotund results of too many feasts in embroidered silk. It was the cord around his waist that was the most intriguing. The glittering golden rope disappeared somewhere between two rolls of fat. If it were loosened, could he be unwound until there was nothing left but the cord itself, a pile of gold and purple thread, and the elegant crown?

Not far away was a band of men with weapons.

"I am returning from a visit from Bethlehem," he explained dramatically to a merchant who stood below him on the sand, staring up at the gestures of the speaker, who wore a ring on every chubby finger.

The camel's rider let out a booming laugh. "Just call me the wise man," he said. "And you?"

The itinerant salesman shrugged. "Call me the merchant," he replied, mounting his fuzzy camel, which was tied to a string of other heavy-laden beasts of burden. "Those are your bodyguards?" he asked,

The wise man chuckled. "Hand-picked every one of them. Twelve of them are my very own sons . . . or even more. I stopped counting."

"There's water ahead," the merchant said, nodding.

He motioned to three men behind him who each led six camels, their bodies weighted down with merchandise that scented the scorched afternoon with cinnamon, cloves, and anise, which mixed with the smell of perspiration and animal. "It would be safer if we traveled together."

"You have our protection," said the wise man.

When they reached the oasis, the merchant pulled out dried fruit, dates, a loaf of hard bread, and a leg of lamb from his packs, hoping to impress the bejeweled man he had met. He even found one of his best bags of wine and presented it as an intended gift, but in return the wise man gave him a handful of gold coins. And he had no opportunity to share his salesman stories; it was the wise man who turned out to be the storyteller.

"The baby didn't look like a king!" said the wise man as he wiped grease from his beard with the sleeve of his garment. "If you showed me even two babies, I could not tell you which was the infant king of the Jews. But I would feel it somehow. Yes, I would know if I were again in his presence. I wanted to stay for the circumcision, but there wasn't time."

"What makes you think the baby is the king of the Jews?" the merchant asked. . . "Even I could make the claim. Anyone can claim."

The wise man was perturbed at the obvious ignorance of the merchant. "Why, it has been prophesied!" he said. "I can't believe you didn't see the star that lit the sky with magnificent light. Fabulous! There has never been anything like it, and I know. I study the stars. I followed it and met up unexpectedly with two other kings who traveled with me to Bethlehem, a perfect place for this birth. We were seeing prophecy come true in our very lifetimes! The three of us who traveled were summoned by King Herod, who also wanted to honor the child. His scribes and priests agreed that the birth was indeed taking place. They, too, were calling the child the Messiah. As we speak, Herod is awaiting word on the location of the birthplace."

“From you?” asked the merchant.

The wise man shrugged sheepishly. “Perhaps.”

“So why are you headed in the opposite direction?”

“If you must know—I had a dream that warned me not to return to Herod. So—what other edibles do you have?”

Saving himself future trips, the merchant pulled a heavy bag from one of the camels and set it close to the wise man. “It’s difficult for me to imagine Herod being pleased with the tale of a child who will perhaps compete against him—challenge him,” he said, pondering for a moment. “The light you spoke of could have come from the palace where the child was born . . . and what was it you said earlier you gave to the child? Frankincense and myrrh?”

Stuffed with dates and lamb, looking like yet another mound of sand in the desert, the wise man lay down flat on his back and sighed . . . “There was not palace. The child was in a simple dwelling, born of simple parents.”

“I think you’ve been had,” said the merchant, poking at the fire. “The child’s father will sell your gifts.”

“No, no, it wasn’t like that,” said the wise man. “When we found the child, we knew immediately that we were in the right place—as poor as it was, as tired and pathetic as the parents looked, as ragged as their belongings. I felt very . . . humble. We fell to our knees, all of us. We hadn’t planned to, but all strength left our bodies, and we were limp with . . . worship, I suppose. After visiting a new king, I should come away with something material, one would think, but I came away with nothing but awe.”

“But why?” asked the merchant. “It was a hoax.”

“I don’t think so,” said the wise man, actually looking the part of a king for a moment. “My friend, I would not have started on this long journey if I did not believe what the stars told me and what my heart tells me now. I may not know all the secrets of the universe, but I know something miraculous has happened, and I was able to be there before it was over.”

Long after the wise man had fallen asleep and was snoring, the merchant put his things together, summoned his men, and mounted his camel, starting off into the night. Turning around, going in the direction from which he had come, he set off for Bethlehem, hoping it was not too late to see the miracle.”

Can’t you just see all this?

Everyone, great, small, rich, poor, from whatever country has the great and glorious opportunity to bow down to Jesus, and take him as our King, our Lord, our Savior.

Amen.

By Rev. Sally J. DeMasters