



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sghwe4TYY18>

When you see the Christmas story in the context of a facebook conversation it may be easier for some to see what an amazing story it is. It tells of how God moved toward us and of shepherds appearing at the manger who already knew about the child because of an encounter with an angelic choir. Of Joseph, the man whose faith in God and trust of Mary placed strong arms of safety around the birth of Jesus. Of a child in a manger where something cosmic happened, for as Mary stroked the face of her child she was actually stroking the face of her God.

What a story. For some of you, as you attempted to keep this story front and center in your families on Christmas morning I am sure it was fun watching your kids as they quietly fidgeted as you read the Christmas story before opening the presents. There were the squeals of glee as the kids and grandkids unwrapped presents they had hinted about over 100 times. Then there was the chance to sit around the table to bless God for this wonderful day and good food as you ate turkey amidst the tumult of noise as friends or relatives shared the day with you. And finally you tucked your exhausted kids into bed as they hugged their new toys and breathing a sigh of relief you sat on the couch and watched 'It's a Wonderful Life' for the 50th time because you were too tired to go to bed.

However for others, Christmas was a quiet day, actually too quiet. What made it special was quietly reading the same Christmas story by yourself and then wrapping yourself in some old memories of Christmas' gone by. It was a bitter sweet day filled with a little sadness but also some joy.

And then there is today. First let me thank you for being here on Boxing Day. I thought I might be all alone this morning for even my wife was contemplating skipping church to spend that money I gave her which was ear marked for 'Boxing Day week'. I know that some of you wouldn't go near the malls no matter what you were offered. But for many, the Boxing Day shopping, looking for that special deal and the excitement around one more day of shopping before the January Visa bill, is irresistible.

Did you ever wonder where the idea of Boxing Day came from? Some say Boxing Day began as the day when we take all our empty boxes from Christmas gifts and fold them into our recycling bins. While the exact history of the Boxing Day tradition is unclear there are two related possibilities. One is that in England, during Advent, Anglican parishes would display a box into which churchgoers would donate money. On the day after Christmas the boxes would be opened and their contents distributed among the poor, thus giving rise to the term 'Boxing Day'. A second possibility is that the day after Christmas was the traditional day on which the rich distributed presents (boxes) to servants and employees who had worked Christmas Day. There are other stories, all related by a common theme which was a day of giving to the poor and helping the less fortunate, a theme that by all appearances seems long forgotten.

Today I want to take you to the best Boxing Day story ever. It was the day when presents arrived after Christmas Day was long over. And they were the kind of presents which left those who received them completely in shock. Matthew 2:1-12

Can you picture Mary and Joseph waving good-bye as the Wise men's caravan left? There would have been this stunned look on their faces. The birth of Jesus was over a year ago, it was a little late to expect baby shower gifts. It had been a year since they had heard the shepherds tell of this amazing Angelic choir singing Handel's Hallelujah Chorus

on the hillside announcing the birth of Baby Jesus to the world. Yet here it was a year later (and after the Christmas sales were over). Now, gifts worth a fortune, were sitting on their kitchen table. Gifts they hadn't shopped for, they certainly couldn't afford and gifts they certainly hadn't expected. So let's walk through a few ideas from the first Boxing Day blow out.

I. Gifts were personally given

If you look at the story of the Wise men, the first thing you will see is that the gifts were personally given to Jesus. Don't forget that these were wealthy people from a country about 800 kilometers away (probably Iraq). They could have sent their gifts by an envoy. But for some reason they felt compelled to personally come and give these gifts to the Christ child. In fact when you read this story, you will notice that personal pronouns are used throughout the story. Matthew 2

Verse 2 ' We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him.'

Verse 9 '...they went on their way...'

Verse 10 'When they saw the star, they rejoiced.'

Verse 11 '...they came into the house . Opening their treasures, they fell down and worshipped him. Opening their treasures they presented to him gifts'.

I am sure that part of the pull to see this new king, for whom the star foretold His birth, was plain old curiosity. But there seemed to also be a desire to personally meet and welcome this new king. So they didn't send a representative but instead they came themselves. I see that same thing happening every Christmas at Churches. I am always amazed at the amount of new people we see at Christmas services who come through the church doors at Christmas (many are people who have put some distance between themselves and God). They come because they want to feel again a little presence of God or they want to reassure themselves that their faith is real even though they presently are a little distant from God. The Christmas season often is a time when there is this pull, a surfacing of that inner desire to be personally connected to Jesus once again. We need to celebrate that and to encourage our loved ones and friends to re-stoke the fires that are still smoldering in their souls.

If you are here today and you remember what it felt like to feel Jesus close and present in your life but it hasn't felt that way for a long time, then determine today to reengage with Jesus. Go back to the place or those people who will help those old feelings become yours again, where you personally felt God close in your life. The bible says that when Jesus came into our world, the reason He came was so He could be called Immanuel which means God with us. More importantly - God with you. So start again and get to know your faith and Jesus again for the first time.

All of us need those 'wise man' experiences in our lives. Those times when we see Jesus again in all the glory of His incarnation and we allow all He is and what He has done wash through our souls and it leave us speechless and ready to give him our treasures, our lives and our futures to Him. Like the chorus portrays '...come in today, come in to stay, come into my heart Lord Jesus'. Today, with the pictures of Christmas and the sound of the Hallelujah Chorus still ringing in our ears, we need to daily choose to carry Him on the journey of our lives through out this next year. Like the wise men, we need to let our

encounter with Jesus this Christmas change how we continue on in the journey for the rest of the year.

II. Gifts were properly given

As you look back over your Christmas experience from the last few weeks you know that there are different ways that Christmas gifts are given. They could be:

i) A gift given for a gift. You know what I am talking about. Every one of us has done this. It is when we give a gift because you received a gift. You figure out how much the gift you received was worth and then you go to the mall and buy a gift for approximately the same amount of money so things stay even. You give out of necessity - we give a gift for a gift.

ii) A gift given for a favor. This is when you receive a gift and you know that while they don't want a gift in return, they will expect something from you in the future. It is like the man who installs the partitions that go between the toilets in the public washrooms. When he gives you a pen for Christmas which says 'When you go, go with us'. You know that he is giving you the pen so he will get your business in the future. As pastors, Funeral Homes do the same thing (I am not kidding). They send us nice yearly calendars as gifts and I am sure what they are saying is 'When someone else goes, go with us'. Those aren't gifts they are poorly masked IOUs.

iii) A gift given from the heart. It is a gift given out of love and respect which does not want anything in return. It is simply given for the joy of blessing the other person. That I believe is what the Wise Men were doing. After their long journey and hearing from King Herod the prophetic words surrounding this Jesus, they somehow grasped a little of who the baby child was. Look at verse 10 & 11. While we don't know how they knew who He was somehow they knew. I'll bet you have had times when God has nudged you deep within your spirit and you didn't know how you knew but you knew that you knew - it was from God. And in the Wise men's case their only response was to bow low before the child and then open their treasures. Those gifts which they had brought so far to show their devotion to the one for whom God had changed the formation of the stars. To do any less wasn't an option.

When it comes to the giving of gifts, so much is done out of giving to receive instead of simply feeling that inner tug within us to give from the heart to those things which Jesus lays on our heart. That could be a time you spend on a ministry such as H.A.T.S. in Haiti or like at the Messiah the other night when over \$3100 was given for those who have less than we do. Once the Wise men were struck by the fact that God had gifted them with meeting the Holy, their natural response was to open their treasures and give to bless God and care for others. We need to see again Christ's coming through the eyes of the Wise Men so we can remember why we are Christ followers, why we are involved in church ministry together, why we need to keep doing what God calls us to do day by day by day. It is because once we have bowed our hearts and will before Jesus like the Wise men, we have no other recourse but to give out of a heart of gratitude. As you and I move into the new year we need to determine that like the Wise Men, having been blessed by an

encounter with Jesus, we will lay ourselves, treasures and lives before our Jesus to do what He asks us to do and go where He asks to go and give what He asks us to give.

III. Gifts that were sacrificially given

Just for a minute try and put yourself in the place of these wise men (probably Zoroastrian Priests/Scholars). They have seen a constellational shift happen in the stars in the eastern sky and so they go to their astrology and astronomy charts to find out what to do. Here is a short history lesson. There is a new book called 'The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi' by Bradley E. Schafer, an Astronomy professor at Yale University that speaks about a coin that he found which could give us a few clues concerning the Bethlehem star mentioned in Matthew 2:2 & 10



On this Roman coin from Antioch Syria, is seen the zodiac sign for Aries the Ram. In trying to understand what the meaning was behind the coin, he found that that Aries (Ram) in those days was known as the sign of the Jews. If you look at the coin you will see that it is telling a story of 2 eclipses by the moon in the area of the Aries in the sky in 6 BC. What happened was that Jupiter (known as the regal, kingly star) came in close conjunction to the Moon (something like the eclipse of the moon the other night which turned the moon red). It happened on December 19 in the Eastern sky and then it happened again on April 17. In some ancient texts and as shown in this coin, Matthew's Bethlehem star has historical evidence. It would seem that these learned astrologers and astronomers put the facts together and that is why they showed up approximately a year later in Jerusalem at King Herod palace expecting to see the newly born king of the Jews. And it would be fair to say that in verse 10 when the star appeared again, it is talking about their beginning of the journey - they could see the eclipse of the moon and Jupiter in the heavens and then as they traveled, the heavenly wonder had disappeared due to it's yearly orbit only to re-appeared again exactly as they left Herod's palace.

So seeing the Kingly star in the east which may have been this double eclipse, they headed out to see this child whom the heavens proclaimed would be a person who would have a profound impact on the world and as they had found out from Herod, would be born in Bethlehem.

So here's a question: What do you give someone who you think has everything? Remember before they headed out on their journey, all they knew was the stars/eclipse said that the person who was born would be a king whose birth was so important that God rearranged the star formation to announce His coming and He would be born in the area of Judea. Among the Babylonian and Roman belief systems this was a common rumor among the learned of the day. And so, their gift had to be befitting someone upon whom the god's smiled and the world would be changed by. So what would you bring for your first audience with such a king?

Can you imagine the thought that went into their gifts. There gifts had to be worthy of a king yet transportable due to the journey they had to take. So they chose gold (the most valuable metal on earth at that time), Myrrh which came from the sap of trees in Yemen and Ethiopia and was used as a medicine to help in the healing of wounds and because of it's beautiful smell was used for Embalming of mummies (ounce for ounce it was equal in value to gold) and Frankincense which was from Somalia which was another very expensive perfume/incense which was more specifically used in the temple as part of worshipping God.

What is neat to see is that they sacrificially gave things which cost them dearly. And on a deeper level, they gave things which had a more profound significance than they may have realized. The gold showed how valuable they viewed this child king, the Frankincense was an incense used in the worship of God in the temple and hinted at who He was (the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords) and the Myrrh, to the readers of Matthew, would instantly be seen as a foreshadowing of what was to come for it was used in the preparation of those who had died. So in prophetic short hand, the gifts whispered 'He will be a King, who is God, who will die for His people.'

The sacrificial giving of the Wise Men tells us that if we want to be involved in God's story and in following His call to make a difference in the lives of others, it will mean being open to do and go where He calls us to go and it will mean sacrifice at times. Unless the Wise Men were willing to follow the inner tug of God on their lives, Mary and Joseph would not have been blessed and cared for. The call of us as believers is to make a difference in our neighborhoods, our city and our world. I am convinced within my spirit that the call on this church in this next while will be to step out sacrificially to make an impact on our world. There are Marys and Josephs in our city and strategic places in the world that are waiting for a touch from God which we are called to bring to them.

IV. Gifts that were specifically given

I wonder as Joseph and Mary looked across the table at the gifts, if they would have wondered why God had nudged the hearts of these star gazers, causing them to travel over 800 kilometers to deliver such extravagant gifts to them? Look what happened that night as Joseph went to bed in Matthew 2:13. As we look at things that swirl around in our lives and the lives of those we love and as we look at walking into a New Year within the week, this is a wonderful promise to us. What it is saying is that God, who can look into

the future, delivered the money they would need for their journey to Egypt even before Joseph and Mary realized they had a need for it. The gifts the Wise Men gave became their traveling money for their trip to Egypt so Jesus would be kept safe. God provided what they would need as they walked into the next phase of their lives. He met their need in a miraculous way and that should give us hope. Was the journey they took hard? Probably. Was it necessary? You bet. But the theme throughout the whole Christmas story and the theme of this last part of the story is simple, God has a plan and at times those plans are ready before we even know we will need them. Now that is a wonderful gift at this time of year.

What does this Boxing Day story tell us? It tells us that as we trust our lives to God and reengage Jesus as part of our lives, at times it will call for sacrifice. But as we do, people God brings us in contact with will be blessed and God wants to remind us that He always has a plan so we need to trust Him in it. For when we do, things happen and gifts enter our lives which will blow us away. That is the real promise on this Boxing Day Sunday.

Some people even tie the Boxing Day idea to the fact that often the Sunday after Christmas is the time when the story of the Wise Men is talked about. As you know, while the Wise Men often appear in manger scenes and Christmas programs, in actuality they didn't appear on the scene until over a year later. It took them over a year to follow the star that appeared at Jesus' birth until they knelt before Him and gave their presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And so, there was a second time when guests and gifts appear in the Christmas story.

Growing up, I thought that the reason we gave and received gifts was because we were following the example of the wise men and as they gave gifts to Jesus, we gave gifts to each other. When you say that out loud it really sounds strange doesn't it? It is like being invited to a birthday party and having the kids give presents to each other instead of giving gifts to the birthday boy. I think that it may be better explained by saying that we give gifts as a symbolic gesture while remembering the gifts that were given to Jesus by the wise men. Or more specifically, because God gave us the gift of Jesus, we get caught up in His generosity and give gifts to others. James 1:7 says "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows".

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