



- Movie Clip – The Nativity
- Read Matthew 2:1-16
- Pray

This time of year, one of the most impressive images impressed upon our minds is that of the three wise men elegantly marching across the desert in search of the Christ child. As you picture this image you may see these three men stylishly strolling across the cover of a thousand Christmas cards.

Or, perhaps you envision one of the many Sunday School Christmas pageants in which many of us have participated as youngsters. You know the ones I am talking about, right? These are the productions in which the wise men were usually played by three fifth or sixth grade boys—unless of course not enough boys wanted to be in the play, in which case at least one of the wise men was, in fact, a wise young girl in disguise. In any event, there they would come, marching down the aisle robed in an array of royal colors. The first would be carrying a shoebox painted gold, and the other two would be toting ornate jars that they borrowed from their mother’s china cabinets, which they had to promise on the penalty of death not to drop. Finally, the pianist would pound out “We Three Kings of Orient Are” and these three wise guys—I mean wise men—would meander to the manger, poking each other most of the way, and they would deposit their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the plastic doll in the makeshift manger that somebody’s dad had crafted out of mismatched pieces of scrap lumber. Sound familiar?

No matter how the image is inscribed upon your minds this morning, it can be a rather indelible one. However, it can also be a bit misleading. For example, as we examine our text from Matthew this morning, which is, incidentally, the only place in all of Scripture where these wise men are mentioned, you will notice some errors in our common understanding of the wise men. First, nowhere does it say

that there were exactly *three* of them. There were three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—which may indicate that there were three men, but, in truth, we do not actually know how many men made this journey to worship Christ. In addition, we can be certain that they were not at the manger on the night of Christ’s birth. Notice, verse one tells us that the wise men, or Magi, came, “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem.*” Moreover, in verse 11, we see that these Magi found Jesus in a house, not in a stable or a manger.

Finally, read with me verse 16. It says, “*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.*” Now, while we could spend the whole message discussing Herod’s insane hunger for power and the ramifications of this evil decree, the point upon which I want to focus this morning is the age he includes in his decree—two years of age. Herod wanted all of the boys two-years and younger to be murdered because the Magi had seen the star two years before they appeared before him and inquired about the Christ. In other words, the journey there, which had encompassed hundreds upon hundreds of miles, had taken them somewhere in the neighborhood of two years to complete.

And as I ponder that long and arduous journey, and as I envision the moment upon which these Magi from the East, who had traveled so very far, finally had the chance to present their gold frankincense, and myrrh before our Lord in worship, an important question comes to mind: Were those gifts the real gifts? Was their most significant contribution at that moment really the things they brought? Or was it something else? Indeed, as we examine this text together this morning, we will discover that they brought gifts much greater than gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We are blessed to consider these wise men today because the example of their worship of Christ provides for us an excellent transition from Christmas present to the New Year ahead. In fact, from their example, we can discover at least two ways in which we are called to worship our Lord 2009. First, let us...

1.) Make the journey.

Were the gold, frankincense, and myrrh really the greatest gifts of the Magi? Or did it have more to do with the fact that their desire to worship Christ compelled them walked for hundreds and hundreds of miles over a span of approximately two years? Was the greater gift the gold or the journey toward true

worship? You see, Christmas is about more than just gifts under a tree, it is about the gift of the journey.

There is a story about an African missionary who worked in the Belgian Congo. In the course of his ministry to the natives there, this missionary had taught them the Christmas story and had told them about the wise men. He told them how these Magi traveled hundreds of miles on foot from Babylonia, and how they had relentlessly searched for more than two years in their search for the Christ child. He told them about the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but, as he did, he explained to them that the more significant gift they gave was the fact that they had walked hundreds of miles over the course of about two years.

After that, one young man who had heard the story, by the name of Cungo, disappeared one day from his tribe and was missing for more than two weeks. Finally, he returned with a very special gift for the missionary, and the special gift he brought was an especially beautiful necklace, at the end of which was a uniquely gorgeous shell. Curious about that shell, the missionary asked Cungo where he had found it. "I have walked to the Great Sea," he said, "for it is only in the Great Sea that this shell can be found. The long walk is part of the gift."

The shell, you see, was beautiful, and it was a very wonderful gift all by itself. However, what made it especially precious was the great journey required to obtain it. In the same way, the gold, frankincense, and myrrh were uncommonly precious and costly gifts all by themselves. What is more, God used these Magi to present these expensive gifts to His only Son in just the right place and at just the right time, for these gifts surely allowed Joseph, Mary, and the Christ child to finance the urgent escape to Egypt that is described in verses 19-21. However, more than these material gifts, the long and determined journey that the Magi made to find the Christ child demonstrated the true worship in their hearts.

If you and I and our church would make the most of 2009 for the glory of God, then, like the Magi in our text, we ought to throw aside every hindrance and make the journey to seek and know Jesus Christ. We ought to heed the words of Hebrews 12:1-2, which give us these exhortations:

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

While we may not have a new star to follow, as the Magi did, we have been graced with an even brighter guiding light. We have the very Words of God in Scripture, attested to by our Lord Jesus Christ, who is Himself the very Light of the World. And just as the Magi studied every nuance of the stars to find the Messiah, so let us make every effort to seek our Savior through the Scriptures, to communicate with Him through prayer, and to find Him in the midst of our fellowship with one another.

Oh that our attitudes would be like that of the Apostle Paul, who in Philippians 3:10-11 says, “*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*” Let me ask you this morning, why are you here today? While there are many good reasons to be in church, I hope and pray that one of our most urgent reasons for being here today, and every week, is an ardent desire to know the Lord. The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way in Jeremiah 9:23-24:

This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise man gloat in his wisdom, or the mighty man in his might, or the rich man in his riches. Let them boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the LORD who is just and righteous, whose love is unfailing, and that I delight in these things. I, the LORD, have spoken!”

With that in mind, let me ask you... Which do you know more about: what pleases the Lord or what pleases the judges on *American Idol*? Whom could you more readily name, the twelve disciples or the celebrity contestants on this year's edition of *Dancing with the Stars*? What occupies more space in your memory—verses from the Bible or statistics about sports? Which pathway is really most important to us this morning—the narrow road that leads to Christ, or the broad path that leads to destruction?

Thus, making the journey to Christ means being very intentional about studying the Bible and meditating upon its message. It means devoting ourselves to prayer and to Christian fellowship so that we might grow together in the grace and purpose of God. And, at the very least, it means being faithful in our attendance in church, for it is very hard to imagine that we are making the journey toward Christ if we are not even making the journey to church. It is a wonderful thing to bring our gifts before our Lord, but let us remember today that, among all of the gifts we

have to offer, few are as pleasing to God as a steadfast commitment to seek and to know Him. Let us join together on that journey in 2009!

That brings us to our second point for this morning. Not only are you called to make the journey, but you are also called to...

2.) Give yourself.

I want to introduce this point with a story that takes place during WWII. It is about a little boy named David, whose father was a soldier on the combat lines in Germany. It was September, and this father wrote to his little son and asked, "What would you like more than anything in the whole wide world?"

David wrote back: "Daddy, I would love to have a puppy. I would love to have a puppy more than anything else in the world."

Well, on Christmas Eve of that year, there came a knock upon little David's door. David answered, and, to his great surprise, there stood Santa Claus, who questioned: "Is your name David?"

"Yes, my name is David," he replied.

"What would you like more than anything in the whole wide world?"

"I would like a puppy," he said.

Without hesitation, Santa reached down into his big bag, opened it up, and revealed a precious little Pekinese puppy. David was ecstatic.

However, many months passed... the war continued on... and soon it was September again. Once more, the father wrote to his son and asked, "And what would you like for Christmas this year?"

The son wrote back: "Daddy, I wish you would come home but mom says that you can't, so I guess I would like an aquarium with angel fish."

Finally, Christmas Eve arrived, and once again there came a knock at David's door, and sure enough, it was Santa Claus who asked: "Is your name David?"

"Yes," responded David.

"And what do you want more than anything else in the world?" Santa asked. And before David could finish his reply, out came an empty aquarium and a bag full of angelfish. David was pleased.

Yet, once again, life passed slowly by. Months came and went, and still David's daddy remained in Germany. Once more, David's father wrote to him in September. This time he wrote, "Son, I am in the war and can't come just now." But what would you like more than anything else in the world?"

David wrote back: "I want you, Daddy. I want you to come home and be with me. That is what I want more than anything else in the world."

The father replied in a second letter, “I just can’t come home, but what thing do you want for Christmas more than anything in the whole wide world?”

David wrote back reluctantly, and with an inner sadness he penned, “cowboy boots.”

The time passed slowly, but eventually, Christmas Eve came, and with it came that traditional knocking on the door. And as David answered, Santa knelt down on one knee, looked him in the eye, and asked, “And what can I give you for Christmas this year?”

David finally broke down and cried on Santa’s shoulder, “I want my Daddy. That’s what I want. I want my Daddy to come and be with me.”

Choking back his tears, Santa said, “Is there anything else? Like cowboy boots, perhaps?”

“I guess so,” David sighed, and he took the boots.

Then, as the brokenhearted little boy was tugging at his cowboy boots, trying to pull them onto his feet, he glanced up to see Santa taking off his red hat... and then his white wig... and finally, off came his long, fuzzy beard... and... unbelievably... it was his Dad! Losing every other ambition, David ran to his dad, threw his arms around him, hugged him, squeezing him with all his might, and saying with both disbelief and delight: “You’re home! It’s you! You’re home! It’s you!”

With true joy in his heart, his dad said: “It was a very long trip, but I simply had to come and be with you this Christmas.”

You see, more valuable than puppies; more valuable than as aquariums; more valuable than cowboy boots ... more valuable than gold, or frankincense, or myrrh ... more valuable than any material gift, is the gift of one’s self in love. The vast sum of all of the riches of all of the richest men in all of the richest places simply cannot compare to the act of giving one’s self to another in love.

And that is the truest gift that the wise men in our passage gave. Their long journey really amounted to the giving of themselves, didn’t it? They wanted to find the Messiah, and they gave themselves completely to the task. They gave their time, their talents, and their treasures to the One they had come to worship. And as they laid their gold, frankincense, and Myrrh before Jesus Christ—the King of kings and Lord of Lords—and as they finally saw Him face-to-face, they simultaneously presented themselves with a testimony of worship that had been both tested and approved by the long journey that had brought them there.

One day, we too will come face to face with the King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ, who now sits enthroned at the right hand of God and rules over all people in

all places for all time. Yet, when we leave this earth, we leave empty-handed. Unlike the Magi, we will not have any material gifts to offer, only the journey that we undertook to know Him and please Him in this life.

Let me ask you, then, what will our journeys declare about our worship? Will they reveal us to be people who offered all of this life for all that Christ is, or will they find that our journey blazed a trail to self-fulfillment and personal glory? Will we have offered the gift of our very selves for the glory of God, or will we have spent our journeys trying to accumulate gifts for ourselves? Will you commit with me to doing your very best in 2009 to devote yourself to the lifelong journey toward Christ, giving yourself as completely to Him as you can every step of the way?

You see, this is what Christmas is all about, isn't it? It is about the journey to give the gift of oneself for the glory of God and the benefit of others. It begins the long walk of the Son of God, journeying from the unimaginable heights heaven to be born in a lowly manger. It continues with the long and grueling journey that Mary and Joseph took from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It is seen in the two-year trek of wise men from the east, who followed a new star in the sky to bow down before the Messiah. And, please hear this—the true meaning of Christmas finds its ultimate purpose and expression in the long walk that Jesus took from Jerusalem to the cross at Calvary.

The journey that Christ calls us to make calls us to offer ourselves to God in worship and to give our lives in love for others, for that is precisely what happened on that glorious night when God gave Himself to us by sending His only Son, born to a virgin, laid in a manger, and sacrificed on a cross.

In conclusion, the journey of self-giving is the wisdom of the wise men, and that is the real meaning of Christmas. It is about that night when God came to earth as a man in order to give Himself for you and for me in the person of Jesus Christ. In 2009, let us each one make sure that we do our very best to make the journey to Christ and give ourselves wholly to Him who came at Christmas to give Himself for us. // What is gold compared to that?