

# Three Wise Gifts

*Matthew 2:13-23* | 1/7/2018

Two thousand years ago, gold, frankincense and myrrh were worth roughly, in today's equivalents, six hundred, five hundred and four thousand dollars per pound, respectively. The Magi celebrated the Christ child with the most valuable items in the ancient world. But these gifts were not just of monetary value. They were also gifts of health and long life. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were among the earliest and most prized curative medicines in the ancient world.

Frankincense and myrrh are both resins that come from wounds in the bark of trees that grow only in northeast Africa and southern Arabia. In the first century, the frankincense resin was considered divine and could only be gathered by special families who would refrain from "impure acts" during harvest season. No wonder the whole civilized world at Jesus' time was begging for frankincense as both a fragrance and a medicine that cured everything from bad breath to skin infections.

Modern researchers have discovered that frankincense has wonderful antiseptic, antifungal and anti-inflammatory properties that make it a useful dressing as well as being a bronchial dilator that helps in lung infections and asthma. Myrrh is biochemically similar to frankincense, though its value in the ancient world was many times higher. A drop of myrrh could double the price of cheaper perfumes, and Egyptians used myrrh to embalm royal mummies. The opening of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922 released wafts of air so rich in myrrh's scent that it almost bowled the researchers over. Myrrh was prescribed for a much wider range of ailments than frankincense. A cure in the ancient world for diaper rash, baldness, obesity, and used for anesthetic. According to Mark's gospel, Jesus was given wine mixed with myrrh during his crucifixion. It was also seen as something that might prolong life. Experiments with myrrh today are aimed at accelerating metabolism, thereby lowering cholesterol and body weight.

Gold, considered one of nature's most perfect substances, was always believed to harbor supernatural healing powers. Today, gold injections help people with rheumatoid arthritis as well as those who do not respond well to standard steroidal treatments. Gold inhibits enzymes that break down proteins in the body.

Jesus was the most powerful personality anyone could hope to meet. He was so powerful because he was so "rich." Jesus was enormously endowed in his personal gifts, his insights, his connections with God, his knowledge, his influence over people and his charisma. He did not deny his powers, nor did he use them to enrich himself personally.

At Christmas, we celebrate the fact that we are rich, ... immensely rich, ... exorbitantly rich, ... colossally rich. We are rich because real riches are spiritual riches. We suffer an embarrassment of riches, perhaps. And our richness is because Jesus gave us the gift of himself.

So, what equivalent to frankincense, gold and myrrh could we offer to others this Christmas to demonstrate the enriching, healing, transformative presence Christ's birth brings into the world?

Perhaps this story might give you an idea.

One evening a minister was called by his four young children to come and be the audience for their living room Christmas play. The father entered the play's "set" to find Jesus played by a flashlight wrapped in a blanket. Joseph was defined by his bathrobe and mop-handle staff. Mary looking solemn with a sheet-draped head. The angel of the Lord was identifiable by her pillowcase wings. And one wise king knelt before the manger with another pillowcase, full of gifts. This king was being played by the youngest child. She felt duty bound to explain herself and her mission. "I'm all three wise men. I bring precious gifts: gold, circumstance and mud!"

Holding in his laughter, the minister reflected on just how wise those three gifts truly would be, if we would lay them before the Christ child.

**Our gold:** The most common item of our own enslavement. We spend so much of our time and energy trying to save money, make money, manage money that it easily can become the focus of our lives. Handing over our gold to God then becomes a symbol of our commitment to a different set of values. God will make goodness out of our gold.

**Our circumstance:** We all exist amidst a host of particular circumstances; sometimes freeing, sometimes limiting, sometimes depressing, sometimes challenging. But it is a safe bet that none of us considers our particular set of circumstances to be ideal or the embodiment of our hopes and dreams. Instead of constantly wishing that our lives had taken shape in a different way along different paths, consider offering God yourself this year, whatever the circumstances are surrounding your life. God's grace is present, no matter our circumstances. God may be using our circumstances to bless us in ways we don't understand yet.

**Our mud:** Through real effort we have all gradually added enough dirt and grit to the clear waters of our lives to muddy them up into a silty, slimy, solidifying mess. By taking our mud to Christ we do not dirty our relationship with God, rather we obtain fresh water for our lives, water to sluice down our muddy nature and get the flow of pure waters running through our souls again. The love of God can cleanse us.

This year, give God the greatest of the wise gifts this year. Your gold, circumstance and mud; that is, your whole life.

We hold in our hearts and in our hands the ability to offer Christ's own healing presence to ourselves, and to the world, everyday, not just at Christmas.

Once we understand the gifts of the Magi we can better comprehend what kind of gifts we too should be bringing to our Lord and Savior. The gifts of goodness, grace and love, our gold, circumstances and mud, as well as frankincense, gold and myrrh. These are the gifts the Christ child truly wants from us - our whole selves.

*Pastor Keith*