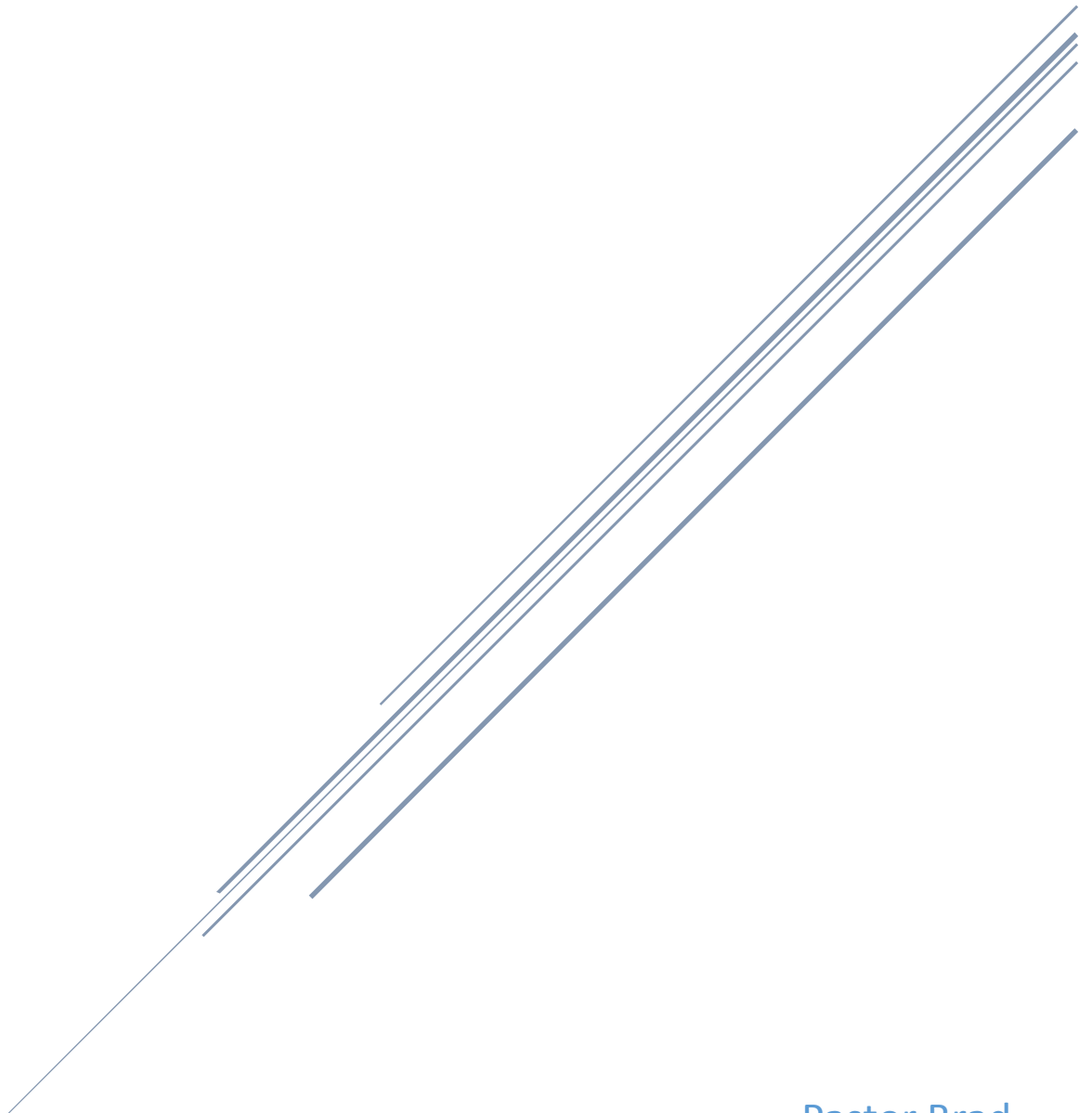


TREASURE GUYS?

Matthew 2:1-12



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Quick game -- What's the first thing you think of when you think of the three wise men?

I'm guessing that the top three, in no particular order, are the camels, the star, and the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold, frankincense and myrrh are usually right there in our minds when we think of the wise men.

These travelers from the east, call them wise men or magi or Zoroastrian astrologers, are forever linked in our minds with gifts -- the gifts that they brought to the Christ child. We even assume that there are three of them simply because they had three gifts. We just sang it: *"We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar."* When we think of the wise men, we think about them bearing gifts. We imagine the whole purpose of their journey was to deliver those gifts to baby Jesus, as a sign of his spiritual importance beyond just the Jewish community of Palestine.

I remember when I was little -- I used to act out little scenarios with our family nativity scene. I would arrange and rearrange the various figures, announcing the lineup each time: "Sheep, shepherd, donkey, angel, treasure guy, Mary, Joseph, camel, treasure guy, horse, cow, treasure guy, and Baby Jesus." I remember the Baby Jesus flying like a tiny superhero into the scene from another world entirely -- shouting to those treasure guys, "Ok, wise men! Bring me my presents!" Even as a child I knew that the wise men are all about the presents.

But what if they weren't? I mean what if, originally, they weren't all about the gifts?

And by originally, I don't mean before 2000 years of tradition got hold of them. I don't even mean before Matthew crafted the story and added his own layers of interpretation. I mean really, really originally—I mean before the wise men themselves even set out on their journey to follow some celestial anomaly.

I noticed something different when I read the scripture this year. You know how you can read the same story a million times and one time something different catches your eye? And it got me thinking: What if the wise men didn't originally set out to bring Jesus presents? What if, originally, they just came to pay homage to a baby king, and the presents were a spontaneous gesture?

Let's look again at the scripture. Three times in this short passage from Matthew, we're told that the wise men come to Jesus to "pay him homage." They told King Herod that they've traveled to "pay him homage." King Herod responded by asking them for information so that he can go "pay homage" too. Then, when they got there, they "knelt

down and paid him homage.” So it seems pretty clear; that paying homage was what they came to do, that was the purpose of their journey and their visit.

Then comes the phrase that caught my eye. The NRSV says, “Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh,” like an afterthought. They came to pay him homage, and **then** they opened their treasure chests and started to offer him gifts. **Their** treasure chests. It says they opened **their** treasure chests – and nothing about gifts they had brought with them. So, what if they originally just came to bow down and pay homage, and the gifts they gave weren’t part of the plan, but instead were a spontaneous response to their overwhelming encounter with the baby Jesus?

Now, I wanted to check this out before I took this theory too far. After all, maybe in ancient New Testament Greek the phrase “paying homage” implied the offering of presents; maybe giving honor involved gift-giving. So I did a little research. The word that is translated “to pay homage” is the Greek *proskuneo*, ([Strong’s G4352](#)). It is usually translated as paying homage, bowing down or prostrating oneself. It comes from two other Greek words: *pros*, meaning toward or in the direction of, and *kuneo*, which means to kiss, “...like a dog licking a master’s hand,” it says. Kinda weird, maybe, but *proskuneo*, paying homage, seems to say a lot about devotion, and little or nothing about giving gifts.

So Matthew’s word about “paying homage” doesn’t seem to indicate that gifts were part of that worship. And no one knows exactly what happened, or even if it happened, apart from Matthew’s account to us. So naturally, I think that gives us the freedom to imagine it a little bit differently, simply because it’s good for us to think differently about things we thought we knew.

So let’ think about this: what if the wise men weren’t originally treasure guys at all? What if they just came to worship, and they were so moved that they couldn’t help themselves – they HAD to respond with generosity?

Hear Matthew’s words again:

¹⁰*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.*

What if the wise men were more like curious seekers than gift-bearers? I imagine they would be delighted at finally finding the place where the star had led. All they knew

was that it was going to be an important king, someone who would change the world forever, and they wanted to be the first to see. When they got inside the little house and discovered nothing more than a baby -- in rags -- they were humbled... and moved. They did more than just pay their intended, required homage. They knelt down before him, they bowed and they bent their hearts, and they worshipped. And they were transformed by the experience.

The glory of his presence was juxtaposed -- love that word -- with the poverty of his circumstances. Side by side: glory, poverty -- right there! The compelling power of the stars joined to the humility of a single human life. They had encountered the living Christ, and it was like nothing they had ever experienced before. They saw themselves and their lives in a whole new way. They needed to respond. They wanted to join their single human lives to the compelling power of the stars. And the first thing they wanted was for the glory of their treasures to uplift the poverty of this star-child's circumstances.

Imagine them stepping out of that stable, or hut, or small family home, filled with awe of the glory of God. They see their camels, their belongings, their treasures awaiting them—and they know that nothing they own matters any more. Their hearts are moved, and they unlock their treasure chests to give it all away.

Out comes the gold they had brought -- gold that paid for their travels; gold that was supposed to secure them safe passage home; gold that was to be invested in goods with which to barter when they got back. All their gold and the things it would buy didn't matter anymore. What mattered was doing anything they could to support the life of this child.

Out comes the frankincense they had purchased along the way -- frankincense they had planned to take home with them -- an indulgent gift for family back home and a sign of the wealth of their houses. Proving their wealth to the neighbors seemed ridiculous now, after seeing a king -- born in a stable. Suddenly they knew that the greatest gift they could bring back to their families was the story of this child, not anything that could be bought.

Out comes the myrrh -- myrrh they had bought as funeral incense, so that when they died -- and their families died -- everyone would know their wealth. A strange gift for a baby, but the wise men realized they didn't need an elaborate funeral to be remembered, that eternal life couldn't be bought with the wealth of this world, but by the sacrifices made toward the next one. Maybe they even sensed, after Herod and the dream, that this child's death would be as important as his life. Bowing toward Christ, they were overwhelmed with joy, and they opened their treasure chests, to present their wealth as a gift to the child.

Isn't that what a true encounter with Christ is all about? Overwhelmed with the glory and generosity of our God, we bow down to worship, and we get up to give. Moved by the power and grace of Christ, we kneel down in worship, and we stand up to serve. We realize in the presence of the living God that treasures that can be stored in chests -- the gold and wealth we've accumulated and collected -- belong in the service of God.

The treasures of our time, and the lives we have been given to live; they're not for the pursuit of wealth or luxury or security or social standing — they also belong in the service of God. Even the treasures of our hearts, those things that can't be held in boxes or explained in their power, yield to Christ's will. A true homage sacrifices self to give to others.

Opening up our treasure chests isn't easy, and it doesn't come naturally. But when we journey closer to Christ, like those wise men, we are transformed. We're changed. From star followers into treasure guys; from curious seekers into generous givers; we're ready to offer all of our treasures for the glory of God. And we join our single human lives to the compelling power of the stars.

In closing, I bring you Howard Thurman's poem "*The Work of Christmas*" as a challenge, or at least a meditation for year ahead:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
 When the star in the sky is gone,
 When the kings and princes are home,
 When the shepherds are back with their flock,
 The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among brothers,
 To make music in the heart.*

The Herods of this world have had their way for far too long. Let the slaughter of innocents end. We have seen the child and we know the wonders of a star-lit peace-filled night. So, let the work of Christmas begin.

Amen.