

It was prophesied that the Messiah would come while the Temple still stood in Jerusalem, and that he would perform many miracles and teach in parables. It was said that a messenger (man of the wilderness) would come before him to announce his arrival.

It was foretold that the Messiah would be a Prophet (like Moses), of whom God said, “I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to [the people] everything that I command” (Deut. 18:18). The Messiah would be a Priest on the order of Melchizedek who was both king of Salem (Jerusalem) and a priest of the Most High God who gave Abraham God’s blessing (Genesis 14). The Messiah would be a King, like David, who would save his people from their enemies. And there are many, many more prophecies about the Messiah, most not related to his birth, but telling of his suffering and death for God’s people.

Probably the Wise Men knew all these prophecies. The only prophecy they didn’t seem to know was the one about where the Messiah would be born. They went to King Herod, the King of the Jews, and asked him for directions. The king’s counsellors correctly shared the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Herod sends the Wise Men on their way with the command to return and tell him what they find, so that Herod can go and worship the new king as well.

But Herod was lying. He had other plans in mind for the new king, plans based on his own expectations. Matthew gives us an insight into Herod’s thoughts when he says, “When Herod heard [about the new king] he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him” (2:3). Herod was a jealous ruler: he coveted power and would share it with no one. To preserve his power, Herod killed some of his own sons and he ruthlessly hunted down his enemies. Matthew is putting it mildly when he said that all Jerusalem was scared of Herod. A new King of the Jews would threaten Herod’s power and rule. This cruel king would have no competition. He expected to rule unchallenged for a long, long time.

The Wise Men naively stumble into Herod’s palace, seeking the new king in the palace of the king who would be most threatened by him. They innocently go to Bethlehem with Herod’s lies in their ears, only to be re-routed home by an angel who told them the truth about Herod.

Herod was not the only person to have the wrong expectation about the new King of the Jews. In fact, the Jews themselves expected a king like King David: a mighty warrior who would rescue Israel from her troubles and rid Israel of her enemies. At this particular time, it was the Romans who ruled Palestine. The Romans kept the peace, but at a price: they taxed the Jewish people heavily. And so, the Jews looked forward expectantly for a new king, a Savior who would restore their fortunes, a Messiah who would save them. It wasn’t wrong of the Jews to expect a king, it’s just that they misinterpreted the kind of king he would be.

In this way, the Wise Men got it right. They understood better than the Jews who the Messiah would be and what he would do. It turns out they brought just the right gifts to give the newborn king.

The first Wise Man brought gold, a gift fit for a king, because he knew that this Child would be the promised King of the Jews. Gold as a valuable and practical gift: perhaps this gold financed Mary and Joseph’s trip to Egypt with Jesus to escape Herod’s wrath. Gold was also a symbol of divinity: this gift recognized Jesus as one who is God and Man, or as Matthew puts it, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). This King would come, not as a conquering hero, but with love and justice. He would defeat God’s enemies through right, not might, and he would establish God’s Kingdom forever.

The second Wise Man brought frankincense, a fragrant oil used in religious services as an offering to God (Ex. 30:34), because he knew that this Child would be our Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14). Frankincense is a symbol of holiness and righteousness. This Child would grow to be a great teacher and preacher, but in the end he would give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). The gift of frankincense to the Christ child was symbolic of His willingness to become a sacrifice, wholly giving Himself up, analogous to a burnt offering. Just as the priests of Israel would sacrifice lambs on the altar at the temple during the Passover Feast to remember when God saved the people from slavery in Egypt, so this Child would sacrifice himself to save us from our slavery to sin. He took upon himself all the sins of the world, so that we might be free to live for God.

The third Wise Man brought myrrh, an expensive spice used for making perfume, incense, medicine, and for anointing the dead, because he knew that this Child was destined to fulfill the prophecies of the Promised Messiah. Myrrh symbolizes bitterness, suffering, and affliction. The Prophets said that the Messiah would be rejected by his own people, beaten and despised, and that he would die a cruel death. But his death would not be the end, for in his death we are saved, and by his resurrection we are given new and eternal life with God. By his sacrifice, we are made whole and worthy before God. In him we are redeemed and prepared to enter the Kingdom of God.

The Bible records the use of myrrh three times in the life and death of Jesus. The first use of myrrh is as the gift of the Wise Men (Matt. 2:11). The second instance comes as Jesus died on the cross: someone offered him wine mixed with myrrh to dull his pain, though he did not take it (Mark 15:22-23). The third instance is when Nicodemus brings one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body when it laid in the tomb (John 19:38-40).

The Wise Men knew exactly what they could expect of this newborn Child. By their gifts, the Wise Men proved that they knew who this Child truly would be: a king to rule us all in love, a priest to take away the fear of sin and the sting of death, and a prophet who would usher in the Kingdom of God and realize all the hopes and dreams of God's people.

The Jewish people expected a warrior king to free them from their human enemies. God gave them so much more by sending Jesus to die and rise again that we might be freed from sin and death forevermore. Thanks be to God who constantly exceeds our expectations.

Prayer: Come Spirit of Advent, awaken new hope within us, ignite our hearts with a fresh awareness of your opportunities, call us beyond our comfort seeking, nostalgic notions, and set us ablaze with passion for your purposes, lead us in your dance of possibilities, and rekindle our desires to seek you, to know you, to share you, to be freed by you. Come Spirit of Advent, and capture our imaginations with unfolding visions of your eternal story; God with us, always with us ever with us! Amen.

What Were They Expecting?

Sunday, December 13, 2015 - Advent 3

Matthew 2:1-12

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

We've all heard the story of the three Wise Men from the East who visited Jesus in Bethlehem. But what if the Wise Men had been Wise Women instead? Well, if the Wise Men had been Wise Women, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a hot dish, brought practical gifts, and there would be peace on earth.

It's funny, but it's true! Men and women have very different attitudes and expectations when it comes to babies being born. Three Wise Women would have been much more practical in their approach to the birth of Jesus. Three Wise Women would have rolled up their sleeves and helped Mary, unlike Joseph who probably stood clueless in a corner. Three Wise Women would have bustled about cleaning and tidying things up while the angels sang and the shepherds visited. And Three Wise Women would have brought practical gifts: maybe some diapers, or swaddling clothes, or a pair of tiny sandals. None of this gold, frankincense and myrrh nonsense.

What were the Wise Men thinking? Who gives a baby gold and frankincense and myrrh? And what in the world is myrrh, anyway? Seriously, what were these supposedly "Wise Men" expecting they would find in Bethlehem? Who did they think Jesus was?

Well, in all fairness, there were lots of expectations about the Promised Messiah. We're told that the Wise Men were scholars, probably astronomers, who saw the Christmas Star and knew enough of the Hebrew Scriptures to realize that this star signaled the birth of the Messiah. And if they knew all that, they probably also knew many of the prophecies surrounding the Messiah: It was said that the Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Messiah would be of the House of lineage of King David.