

**The Fourth Gift of the Magi**  
**Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12**  
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Sometimes the tradition of the Church is a great aid to biblical study and interpretation. It highlights and deepens our understanding of the Scriptures, bringing with it the wisdom of our ancestors in the faith. There are other times, however, when tradition focuses our attention on a particular aspect of a text to the exclusion of others. The story of the magi is a case in point. The tradition that raised me presented this as a story of “three kings” or “three wise men” or “three magi” who gave Christ three gifts. The nouns for the travelers were used interchangeably, but the adjective never varied: it was always three.

Matthew, however, does not specify that there were three magi. The number is inferred from the fact that three gifts were presented: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because tradition has concentrated on three gifts given by three magi, it has missed something in the passage that is much more central to its interpretation: a word that occurs at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the story. The word in Greek is *proskyneō*, and it is translated by the NRSV as “pay him homage.” Paying homage to Christ is *the* central theme in this narrative. It gives the story its purpose, its direction, and leads to its culmination.

The first appearance of the theme is in verse 2 when the magi announce the reason for their long journey: “[We] have come to pay him homage.” To pay homage, of course, means to worship, but *proskyneō* conveys much more than the common understanding of worship as quiet reverence. The word was used to describe the custom of prostrating oneself at the feet of a king. It dramatically and graphically expresses the idea of giving not just gifts, but our entire selves to the object of our worship. In the magi’s journey we see a metaphor for our own journey of faith and the need to give ourselves utterly and completely to the only one who is worthy of worship, that is, to Christ.

The next occurrence of *proskyneō* is in verse 8 where Herod tells the magi that he wants them to report to him when they have found the child, so that he too may “pay him homage.” Obviously, this is duplicity on the part of Herod. When he hears nothing back from the magi, he orders the slaughter of “all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.” (2:16)

The irony is that Herod unknowingly states what in truth he needs to do. The despot who rules by violence and fear needs to prostrate himself before the power of compassion and justice. He needs to give himself entirely to the grace that is incarnate in the child whom the magi seek. Herod's duplicitous and ironic statement helps us understand more profoundly why the magi's quest frightened the tyrant "and all Jerusalem with him." (v.3) Herod and his consultants recognized the implications of the birth the minute they heard what had compelled the journey of the magi: if there is a new king who can inspire people to undertake a strenuous journey to an unknown location so they can pay him homage, then the magnitude of their effort suggests that the established powers are at risk of being challenged.

The magi continue on their way until they find the child, and then something profound happens, something that our traditions, pageants, carols and Epiphany celebrations frequently obscure from view. The magi do not immediately present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew says that the first thing they do upon entering the house and seeing Mary and the child is kneel down and, you guessed it, *proskyneo*, pay him homage. Only after this act of worship, only after giving themselves completely to Christ, do they present their material gifts.

In his book *The Air I Breathe*, preacher and author Louie Giglio opens with this bold proclamation: "You, my friend...are a worshiper! Every day, all day long, everywhere you go, you worship. It's what you were made to do. It's who you are." Giglio makes the case that we're created by God, for God; thus, we're created with something of an internal "homing device," something unseen and frequently unrecognized that continually pulls us toward our creator. But we don't live in a vacuum, and we have been given a gift called free will, so for various reasons we ignore the longing for home or we're forgetful of where our true home is. Sometimes, like the prodigal son, we even deliberately choose to leave home.

We can tell where we are in relation to home by taking a close look at what we worship because we worship what we most value. We each have an altar and every altar has a throne. For a lot of people, both inside and outside the church, it is the self that sits on that throne. Our time, our affections, our energy and loyalty, our money are all given in pursuit of that which glorifies and pleases the self.

The magi are an example of another way. These are men who recognize that their true home is God and therefore, it is imperative that they take whatever risks are required, make whatever sacrifices are needed, and travel whatever distance is necessary in order to prostrate themselves before the one true King, before the one and only one worthy of their worship.

This kind of worship accomplishes three things/tasks: **first, it reorients our lives away from self and towards God.** Worship puts God back at the center where God rightfully belongs. I say, “back” at the center because for most of us, I don’t think we deliberately say to God, “Hey, get off the throne; you’re in my seat and I can take it from here.” Instead, what happens is usually much more subtle, more gradual. We get busy, stressed, inundated with demands from every corner of our lives. Soon we’re feeling overwhelmed, tired, and worried, and then it hits us—we have forgotten home *again*. We have failed to pray, failed to ask for wisdom, failed to give ourselves and our situation to God, failed to seek God’s way. Worship reminds us that God is not absent or uncaring about our circumstances; that with God, things are possible that are simply not possible on our own. Worship reminds us of our call to live our lives in grateful response to God, for all that we have and all that we are is pure gift. Worship grounds us in the reality of God. The culture sure won’t, which is why corporate worship is so important. We need each other, to encourage each other to the life of faith and discipleship. We do that in worship.

**Second, worship changes who we identify with.** The magi were wealthy men, and they were accustomed to the halls of power. But, through worship they identified themselves with a poor and weak child. It would have been so easy for them to look at these unassuming parents, in this nondescript setting and turn their noses up, wondering why on earth they were in the presence of these peasants. Worship turns the normal order of human relationships on its head. The truth is that we’re not usually very comfortable with that. Worship prods us to align our hearts with the heart of God—and God’s heart is with the poor, the insignificant, the refugee, the least. The picture of three wealthy and noble men on their knees, heads bowed is an image we would do well to ponder—and emulate.

**Third, worship changes which gifts we treasure.** The magi set aside all else to undertake their journey to the Christ child. Whatever other plans they had, whoever else they might have entertained, whatever they thought their priorities were, that all changed when the star appeared. Suddenly, planning for this journey, making the necessary preparations, and embarking onto this unknown—but illumined—path was all that mattered. Everything else could wait. Everything else was secondary. There is an urgency to this trip, and it is an urgency that reflects the value of what these magi are about. They are off to seek and to worship the King of Kings. That is the priceless treasure—not the gifts that are carefully stored in their luggage, but the opportunity to be in Christ’s presence and worship him. And in response, the most important gift they give is themselves.

There is one final point to be made. Gift giving can be a way of manipulating others which is why the order of the magi's actions, homage first and gifts second, is significant. If the first thing the magi do is present their gifts, then it might seem that they are the ones in command of the situation. There they would stand with precious goods in their outstretched hands, awaiting the recipient's recognition and gratitude. They would appear like rulers presenting treasures to each other on a state occasion while meeting in the middle of a ceremonial room, each of them on their feet and facing the other, in order to indicate their parity with one another. That is not the case with the magi. They express their relationship to Christ by prostrating themselves in humility before him. First, homage. First, worship. First, giving themselves utterly and completely to Christ. Then, offering their regal gifts.

It turns out that the magi's fourth gift, paying homage to Christ, is in fact their first gift. On this Epiphany Sunday, the question for us is, what is our gift to the Christ child? Are we offering mere trinkets or what Christ most wants—the gift of our hearts?

Thanks be to God. Amen.