

GOLD

The story of Jesus, as we know it, begins with His baptism. *“Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.’”* (Mark 1:10-11) That is the true Christmas.

Jesus was born of the Spirit, as He said we must also be if we want to participate in His Kingdom – in His life, in His love, in His purpose.

“Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.’” (John 3:3-8)

Unlike some theologians, Jesus speaks of what He knows and has experienced. The whole purpose of the Incarnation – the coming of Jesus to our planet – was to open up for us a new and living WAY. We believe God sent his Son as one of us, that we might follow Him into this new WAY. But God coming to us in this manner is tougher than we want to realize. It must be authentic, or it turns into a charade, a puppet show. Yet it must also carry the dimensions of the LIFE to come. Jesus must truly be *one of us*, or we cannot truly follow. If we just want Him spiritual and ethereal and other-worldly, then why would He bother to come? If He comes with other-worldly power and identity far beyond us, He is no more relevant to us than the Creator God we can surmise but never see, draw close to, or follow. On the other hand, if Jesus knows no more than we do – if He has no new light or power or purpose to bring to us – then why would we follow Him? So the Incarnation is mystery mixed with practicality – a man closer to God than we have ever seen before, yet still totally one of us.

Sometimes I go to churches away from here. They have all these mysteries totally figured out, locked down in nice creeds, and wrapped up with a nice pretty ribbon. We all recite the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed (which was invented three hundred years after Jesus' apostles were gone), and we pretend that we understand all about who Jesus is and was, and where He came from. And I go home wondering: Do we sound like that here when visitors come to worship? God forgive us. Lord have mercy. There are so many "developments" that try to make the mystery and the love more clear, but they end up obscuring more than they reveal. They often put more distance between us and a true response to who Jesus is, and what He really means to us personally.

When my son-in-law Russell was dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), he could still drive and walk, on a good day, but he could no longer talk. Communication was via an electronic box – he typed the words, and the box spoke them. Russell asked me to come over one day so just the two of us could talk. My daughter said he wanted spiritual guidance. Russell had read some of my books and sermons and knew some of my quirks, and he said he wanted a short-form summary of what Christianity was really about. He was particularly troubled because of his inner reaction to the name "Jesus." He had heard it used most of his life in such a disagreeable way that it caused a severe negative reaction inside whenever he heard it. Now time was running out. He had gotten past a lot of his earlier aversions, but this one was still bothering him. The Lutheran church he belonged to was both helping and hindering his faith. He said he hoped he wasn't putting me on the spot.

It was every preacher's dream. He could barely talk, but he was eager to listen. I wish I could share with you the next three or so hours, including his comments and facial expressions. But in essence I told him that like me, he would have to get past all the things people say about Jesus, and get back to what we can piece together from the Gospel records. Russell studied the Bible a good deal, by the way.

Secondly, I told him he needed to delete the Virgin Birth, which is a later add-on, and the Second Coming, which is a tag-on from before Jesus ever came. Most Christians won't let go of either one, no matter what Jesus said, did, or taught. I reminded Russell that, for example, sermons and teachings about the Book of Revelation and the Second Coming sound exactly the same as apocalyptic scenes and teachings from before Jesus ever came here. He may as well not have bothered

coming. And when John tries to tell the apocalyptic vision in a dramatically new way to match the life and Message of Jesus, we insist on turning it back into exactly the same old message we had before Jesus arrived.

So I said to Russell what I say to anyone who will listen to me: The core and heart of our WAY is prayer – the Holy Spirit with us, guiding and directing and comforting us. That is the life Jesus really lived. Jesus brings us the possibility of turning life over to the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit. *We can follow Him* into baptism, and New Life. The rest of the story, so dramatic it obscures the real message for many, is about not letting Satan, death, or Hell – any of the pressures we all find in this world – steal this New Life away from us. Jesus saves us *from* Sin (which is separation from God), and saves us *for* God – and for the LIFE God has designed for us – by showing us that we no longer have to be afraid of anything in this world. There is nothing they can do to steal us away from God, who will raise us up on our last day here.

The Cross is not the aim or goal. The Cross is execution. The Cross is symbol of the worst the world can do to us. But the Cross could not control Jesus. If we follow Him, we cannot be controlled either. Christianity is a profound revolt from within, and into a different and altogether better realm. What does Jesus say to the thief on the cross beside Him? “Hey, if I twitch hard enough, maybe I can sprinkle some of this blood over onto you and you’ll be saved.” Hardly! What Jesus does say is: “Without fully realizing it, you are claiming me and my WAY of Life, and today you will be with me in Paradise.” (bvbV) The Cross is *not* the good thing about Christianity – it is the very worst. The Cross shows us how the world reacts to the goodness of God. Only, without even meaning to, the Cross also shows us that we can choose our Lord, instead of choosing this world.

I know, I know. It’s supposed to be Advent, not Lent. As you know, I always get the two confused. That’s because the same Lord, and the same Message, rules both – in mystery beyond our full comprehension. The Holy Spirit IS our Resurrected Lord – with all of us, in all places, at all times – whenever and insofar as we will allow it. *Immanuel* = God with us. Apart from that, everything else is just the trappings, make-believe, lies mixed with sentiment – and much of it is misleading. This life of obedient prayer and devotion is most rigorous; it threatens the life of the world as we know it. It was not social action or political

revolution that got most of our great leaders killed – it was prayer: putting God ahead of all other earthly authority. Christmas as most people know it never converts anybody; it's too pretty and nice and warm. Sensing who Jesus really is and then trying to follow Him into the rigors of baptism – and a life of prayer lived for God – *that* is what converts people. And that is not about creeds, pretty white steeples, or church programs intended to seduce new members. It is about a new kind of LIFE, and a serious desire to live it.

Being born of a virgin destroys all that. Jesus is no longer one of us. None of us were born of a virgin, nor can we ever be. But we *can* be born of the Spirit, like Jesus was. Whether with water or spirit or both, we can turn away from a life that is willful and separated from God. All of us know that kind of life, and have lived it. But like Jesus, we can die to the old life and be raised to the New Life – and we too can hear God's reassurance: "You are my beloved daughter" or "You are my beloved son." And like Jesus, we can come up from that "water" into dedication, love, and devotion for God like we have never known before – like we never dreamed was possible.

Christmas as we know it destroys all that. It tries to trade the mystery of the Incarnation for a miracle of smoke and mirrors that has never called people into authentic life in Christ Jesus. In all the long history of my ministry, Christmas has never helped to strengthen the faith community, nor has it helped any individual to become a true follower of Jesus. It has been a pleasant distraction at best. More often, it has thrown people off-course entirely. I believe Christmas has done this from its beginning. The veneration of Mary is not the same as devotion to Jesus Christ. No matter how much we may appreciate art, architecture, sentiment, or generosity, it is not the same as turning will and life over to the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

Somebody tacked new stories onto the beginnings of two of the Gospels. It was not the same person. They did it hoping to enhance our veneration of Jesus. They did it thinking they were finding authentic information from Old Testament prophecy about the birth of the expected Messiah. They did it in response to the hunger of Greek and pagan cultures to know more about the auspicious birth of somebody important enough to be the Savior. But the stories are inconsistent with each other, and they do not match the rest of the information of the Gospels they are

attached to. They fly in the face of an earlier and stronger tradition and teaching that still remains in the writings of the New Testament itself.

Jesus is alive and here, present as Holy Spirit, so that He can be with each and every one of us no matter where we go. Jesus wants each of us to know a LIFE far beyond what we could ever imagine without Him. Jesus wants us to follow Him, be with Him, converse in constant prayer and collaboration about everything we are doing and everything we care about. He never controls or influences without permission, but He is always willing and eager to transform and redeem whatever of ourselves we are willing to bring to Him.

If we bring that part into Christmas with us (the “Immanuel” truth – the “God with us” part), then this will be the best Christmas we have ever known. If not, it will be the same old distraction – a few days of holiday break and, for some, pleasant family gatherings – but nothing in our lives will change. Focus on the baptism: on the voice – the calling – that tells you how loved and special you are, and which then commissions you to be part of the ongoing story of God calling ALL of us – all of his children – home. The virgin is only a distraction and is never real. It is a mistranslation from *almah* (in Hebrew) to *pathenos* (in Greek). Isaiah simply wrote “young woman” (7:14), but in translation from Hebrew to Greek (Septuagint version) it came out “virgin.” (“Virgin” in Hebrew is *bethulah*.)

There is truth in myth and legend. The errors do not mean that their authors didn’t love Jesus. They told beautiful stories. That’s part of the problem, isn’t it? We love some of the stories. Only, more and more the meaning of the stories themselves is obscured by the hype and secular frenzy of Christmas time. To begin with, you cannot homogenize the Luke story with the Matthew story without losing the meaning of both. Even good myth has internal authenticity, a pattern, and principles that it is trying to reveal. If you know more than one story, they may enrich each other. But if you mix them together, you end up knowing neither. And you do have to let the myth keep its own truth. That is, you must pay attention to how it is shaped and told, or you lose the very message it is trying to proclaim.

Matthew’s story of the wise men is an almost perfect illustration of myth gone bad. As the story is actually written, I have great appreciation for it. It moves me, and I know it speaks deep truth. It is compelling as a profound parable of how true believers will respond to the coming of

Jesus. But as I hear it portrayed in modern Christmas – in story and song, and in the proclamations and sentimental slush of most (though not all) Christian worship services – there is hardly any connection left to the very truth it is trying to portray.

First of all, you have to get all the shepherds out of the story, and tell them to take their sheep with them. There is no manger. The cattle are not lowing. The story takes place in a house. And there are no angel choirs. The atmosphere is somber and filled with danger (not the wild celebrations of Luke). Herod is alarmed, and the wise men are realizing with ever-greater clarity that they are endangering the very life of the infant they have come to worship. They are now moving with stealth and haste. They are still eager to find and honor the propitious child, but they are also eager to melt away before Herod's agents can track them to find and kill the baby. **The story is saying that this child is born into deep danger, and that this danger will always surround His life in this alienated world.** The one who wrote this story knows how the real story ends, and he is building that truth back into his original story. Lots of people go clear through Christmas and never remember – never take it to heart – that the world did not recognize Him, and even His own would not receive Him. That truth has not greatly changed in all the years since.

Stop and think a moment. Our entire culture goes through huge celebrations and antics every year at Christmas time. But the essence of this story is that Jesus is in danger: He is not recognized or welcomed or received. Don't you detect some inconsistency here? Is it not the height of irony? We think perhaps that the struggle is all over with, in our time? That the whole world is now all gushy in love with the Savior? And that the real celebration is because we have all finally devoted our entire lives and all of our choices, motives, purposes, and fortunes to the will and guidance of Jesus Christ, our true and rightful King? Oh my friends, if our joy is not mixed with tears at Christmas, we haven't the faintest notion of what the real Christmas is about.

In any case, Matthew's story takes place at least ten years before Luke's census and the burro ride to Bethlehem. If there are camels, Matthew's story does not mention them. If you are trying to elude Herod's agents, you probably don't want to be conspicuous with camels. And the wise men are not kings, they are seers – astrologers, if you take the literal

translation. The star means Jesus has a birth chart unlike any other person who ever lived. But we won't get into that.

What most offends Matthew's story – and what is most necessary for all of us to correct in our minds if we want to hear his message in any meaningful way – is the part about three wise men. The moment we posit three wise men, we miss the most important truth the Matthew birth story is trying to proclaim. The story does not say anything about three wise men. The story is about **THREE GIFTS!**

No translation on the face of the earth says anything about three wise men. *“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.... Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.... And after having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.”* Did you hear anything about three?

Here is the thing about three: *“After coming into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”*

What is the very essence, message, and purpose of the story? That if you recognize His coming – if you have any awareness of the magnitude of what has happened – you will come and worship! You will bring **ALL THREE GIFTS!** Everyone who recognizes Jesus will end up awestruck – they will end up recognizing that this is the greatest person ever born among us. But even more to the point: Everyone who recognizes Jesus will end up bringing three gifts to Him. Not one gift per person; **EACH OF US WILL BRING ALL THREE GIFTS.** That is the real point and purpose of Matthew's story. What is our response to the coming of the Messiah? Our response is symbolized and embodied in these three gifts. If you do not bring all three of these gifts, you do not recognize Him. If you bring only one of the gifts, or even just two, your awareness is only partial. Your response cannot bring you into the fullness of the New Life in Christ. The lovely little popular corruption of three wise men, each bringing one gift, undoes the very meaning and essence of the story itself. I'm sure nobody meant any harm by this. It was a simple, careless device for making it easier to deal with the story. (And perhaps easier to keep Jesus from having any great impact on our lives.)

In any case, the corrupted symbol matches the confusion of the church. People think they get to choose which of the three gifts they want to bring. So most bring frankincense. Far fewer bring gold. And only a tiny handful bring myrrh.

Of course, the fact that all across the world, Christians of every persuasion are bringing only one of the three gifts – and are thereby missing the dynamism and delight of the Christian WAY – you think perhaps that’s harmless too? And hey, two outta three ain’t bad, right? But as always, when we play games with God by *our* understanding instead of God’s, something vital and crucial is always left out. Half-dedicated Christians are *not* halfway to the Kingdom; they have not yet even found the WAY.

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

Wise men bring all three gifts. All sincere followers of Jesus bring all three gifts. And the first gift is gold. Do you want to talk about gold? For those who bring all three gifts, it is the easiest of the three. That doesn’t mean it is less than profound. But we have no choice, do we? If we want to welcome the Messiah, we bring gold. Do you bring gold?

We brought gold, or at least pledged it, on Covenant Sunday. There is a direct connection, if in truth this gift was tribute to our King. And that is what we said it would be, or at least what we wanted it to be. But Matthew’s story goes to the source and core of stewardship: It is not just the amount of gold, it is the meaning of gold itself. GOLD DECLARES HIM KING. You always bring gold to your king. You give him a crown of gold, that he may have wisdom and a pure heart. We don’t know such things anymore, but Matthew did, and his whole world did.

The wise men do not bring gold to Jesus so that He will have a little money to fall back on in hard times. It is not to make him rich. (He comes richer than this world can imagine or comprehend.) Gold declares Him King! Yes, it means that Jesus has rights over our material resources. It means He has a right to determine what we build, and do not build; when we go to war, and do not go to war; what all of our efforts should be toward, both individually and collectively. Gold declares Him King. The gift of gold is a declaration of political, social, and personal allegiance.

In our kind of world, the ramifications of this allegiance are endlessly confronting and confusing us. But our intention is not confused. The first gift says, with eloquent simplicity: “We will obey and serve You. You are our King, and there is no other.”

The Roman Empire said: “Caesar Augustus and his successors are gods, and they are your true king, and you will swear allegiance to Caesar or we will kill you.” And the Christians replied: “So kill us. Our God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, and HE is our true King. We have no other. And His Kingdom endures forever.” The result, of course, was that many of them died, at least in this world. We cannot say they were murdered, since the only viable state declared them enemies of the state and executed them for treason. But they knew the story, and what it meant to bring Him gold. That was what *Immanuel* meant to them – not some pathetic little play-at-being-nice-and-generous for three weeks, then back to business as usual in January. Gold declares Him our King. Once we bring Him gold, Christmas never ends. What could end it?

So you see, it doesn't matter how the wise men got there, how many there were, or what their names were. The more details we try to tack on, the more we distract ourselves from the real issue, and from the real meaning of Matthew's story: Will we or will we not bring Him gold? Gold declares Him King. And that is only one of the three gifts we bring.