

Christmas Day, 2016 (a Sunday)

The Joy of the Shepherds and the Gifts of the Wise Men

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Lessons: *Luke 2:1-20*
Matthew 2:1-6
Arcana Caelestia 6180:1-2 (parts)

Shepherds are people who care for sheep. They protect them from other harmful animals or other people who might steal them; they make sure they have the food they need to be healthy and grow; and they lead them to safe places. So shepherds are a lot like the people who do the same things for other people, and especially those who do so in a spiritual way: they protect them from ideas and feelings that are harmful; they make sure there is enough love and wisdom in their lives to keep them spiritually healthy, and they lead them to safe environments – places where they can get support and encouragement to live a good life.

When the Lord was born in Bethlehem all those years ago the world was NOT a very safe place. The people who were supposed to be protecting and providing for the members of the church at that time were not doing a good job. In fact, they were just *using* the rest of the people to get the things *they* wanted: power and control and worldly riches and fame! Worst of all, they were using the teachings of the Word in a cruel way to get these things.

So the Lord came into the world to change this situation by TEACHING and LEADING people to a better way of life. It's pretty clear that He didn't expect the bad people to change, but by explaining what the teachings in the Word really meant, and by DOING all those things all His life He showed everyone how to have a safe and useful, happy life. And He made it possible for everyone who would follow Him to do the same.

So the Lord also is like a shepherd to the flock of people who will follow Him. In fact He called Himself "the Good Shepherd," and when we say the 23rd Psalm, which begins, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..." we think of Him in the world doing all the wonderful things He did to help people: - to protect us from harm and teach us how to live well.

Now think of the shepherds in the Christmas story. Because they were people who cared for their sheep they can remind us of the ministers and teachers who care for their church members by telling them about the Lord and sharing His love with

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them. And just as the shepherds rejoiced at the news of His birth, so the ministers and teachers who really want to help people follow the Lord rejoice because He has come down to earth and made Himself visible and understandable, inspiring them and making it possible for them to do their jobs well.

But did you know that there's a part of YOU that's also like a shepherd? First of all, you can be a good shepherd to the people around you, especially the younger ones who count on you to be a good example and to help them stay safe. Not only that, but there's a part of you that always wants to do the right thing, and THAT part of you can be especially glad that the Lord was born since that is how He made it possible for you to do anything right. That is how He solved the problem of evil and falsity in the world, actually letting Himself be attacked by selfish, angry people and the bad spirits that were with them so that He could fight against them and put them in their place – not by hurting them but by teaching them, taking away all their excuses and all their power to hurt and confuse others. Now if we will honor the Lord as the shepherds in the Christmas story did we will use His teachings to help all sorts of people find the spiritual nourishment and safety and peace that they need.

Now then, what about the wise men?

Wise men – truly wise men – are people who know and understand what the Lord teaches in His Word, and who do what He teaches. So they can remind us of all the people in this world who are like that – not just teachers and ministers but people of ALL kinds who have all sorts of different occupations who love to learn and do what the Lord teaches – including YOU.

And do you remember the three gifts that the wise men brought the Lord? Yes, of course: they brought gold and frankincense and myrrh. These gifts also remind us of the three most important things we can offer the Lord in our lives. The gold is a symbol of our love for Him (the good of love); the frankincense is a symbol of our faith in Him (the good of faith), and the myrrh is a symbol of our obedience (the good that we do). So the story of the wise men and their gifts isn't just about some characters in history, it's about the part of ourselves that "comes from the east" to worship the Lord as the ideal Man – the perfect Man; the one Human Being we can count on to teach and lead ALL human beings on earth to heaven.

Let's think about the three gifts. Why is gold the symbol of love? What IS gold, anyway, and what is love? Well, gold is a very precious metal, which means it is very valuable. It is very soft and dense, meaning it is heavy – something we don't usually notice because we don't usually have much of it to hold. It can also be pol-

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ished so it is very bright and shiny. Another thing about gold is that it doesn't rust or corrode. When people find gold treasure in sunken ships it is just as good as ever, even though it has been under water for centuries!

All these qualities of gold remind us of love, especially our love for the Lord, because that, too, is very precious, and soft, and beautiful and pure. So what is love? The thing is, it's very hard to explain! It's a feeling, but that's only part of it. It's a desire, but that, too, is only part of it. To love is to CARE deeply about someone or some thing – to want to have that person or thing in your life and if it's a person, to want what is good for that person, and to make that person happy. One great quality of love is LOYALTY, the ability to stay connected and to continue to want what is good for another person even when it seems impossible.

The Lord loves everyone. But only wise people really love the Lord. So when we are wise we care about Him, we want to do things that will make Him happy, and we want to stay connected with Him as much as possible.

We can't create love; only the Lord can give it to us. But we can GET it from Him if we practice what it's all about. Then like the wise men in the Christmas story we have something really valuable to give back to Him... but the thing is, HE DOESN'T NEED IT. So when WE offer OUR gift of love to the Lord the best way to do it is to share it with other people by doing what is good for them. THAT is what really connects us with Him and makes Him happy since it helps Him make everyone happy, which is what He loves to do.

The second gift the wise men brought was frankincense. Now it's too bad that we don't have any of that to show you today, but you can know that it is a kind of sap from certain trees that, when it is dried and powdered, can be burned to make a very sweet aroma or smell in the air. Sometimes the powder is stuck onto little sticks and then people light the sticks like they would light a candle, and when it burns it fills the air with that smell.

So why would the wise men offer frankincense to the Lord? Well, the sweet smell of frankincense in the air is a sign or symbol of our faith, especially our faith in the Lord. But what is faith, and why is it like frankincense?

People have all sorts of funny ideas about faith, but the Lord tells us that it is knowing and believing what is true because we can see that it IS true. We don't argue, we don't make excuses, we don't question whether it's right or wrong, we just KNOW it's true and so we accept it. Sometimes we get our faith the hard way by learning from our mistakes; sometimes we get it just by reading and understand-

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ing the Word so that we can say, “YES! I see that this is true.” But however we get it, when we HAVE it we have something like frankincense that creates a wonderful atmosphere of trust and peacefulness all around us. And we can offer this to the Lord, just as the wise men offered their incense, by knowing and remembering His teachings, and by being really thoughtful about how to do what He teaches.

The last of the three gifts the wise men brought to the baby Lord was myrrh, and again you may wonder what that is. Well, it’s another kind of sap, or gum resin from certain trees, but instead of making it into a powder to burn, people make it into a LOTION to put ON burns – or other injuries. It’s a little like the juice from an aloe plant: it has great HEALING properties, so when you get hurt it helps you get better.

Now the Lord has explained to us that myrrh is a sign or symbol of obedience, or simply DOING what we’re told to do. And you know that nothing makes you quite so happy as when people do what you want them to do! But think about it the other way around: you can make other people happy by doing what THEY want, too, right? But best of ALL is when we do what the LORD wants us to do because HE wants what is best for EVERYBODY. And the great thing is that when we do what the Lord wants us to do, everybody benefits, everybody feels better, everybody gets the healing power of our good deeds. And if we do it because the Lord said so, then it really is like the myrrh that the wise men offered as a gift the Lord.

To review, shepherds are people who care for their sheep, and the joy they felt in seeing the Lord can be OUR joy, too, when we care enough about other people to share with them the love and wisdom the Lord teaches us.

Wise men are people of know and understand what the Lord teaches in His Word. We can be like those wise men, too, when we learn and do the same. And WHEN we do, then we can offer Him gifts just like the wise men in the story did – gifts of love, and faith, and obedience – not because we have to but because we know that these gifts really please the Lord because they make life better for everyone.

Now, then, let’s be thankful on this Christmas day for the Lord’s life in this world, for all that He has given us and for all that He can still teach us.

Amen