

Epiphany
Jan 6, 2010

And so we hear once more the story that closes out the Christmas drama, the arrival of wise men from the East. It is a story as familiar as our own Epiphany Pageant that we will hold this afternoon, where we will see the story of the wise men acted out again. It is a story as strange and exotic as one of the Tales of the Arabian Nights. Who are these wise men out of the east? Why do they travel so far to honor a young King of the Jews? And why do they think gold and frankincense and myrrh are appropriate gifts to honor a newborn baby?

The story, as the evangelist Matthew tells it, doesn't provide a lot of detail. Over the years, those sketchy details have been filled in to make the story the familiar one we know. First, tradition added a number of wise men ... three. Later tales gave them names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazaar. Ancient fathers of the church decreed that gold was a gift to honor Jesus' kingship, that frankincense would mark the fact that he was divine, and that myrrh foreshadowed his burial, when it would be one of the oils and spices used to anoint his body. And lately, modern scholars have proposed that the wise men were astrologers and magicians, probably from Persia, which is now Iran, and that they may have been followers of the Zoroastrian religion.

All of which is very interesting, but it doesn't answer the question that really provokes me. Did they really think a baby would need gold and frankincense and myrrh? What kind of gifts are those to give a newborn child? I'm sure most of you have heard the joke about the three wise women. It asks, "You do know what would have happened if it had been three wise WOMEN instead of three wise men, don't you? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts."

Casseroles and diapers, or gold and frankincense and myrrh? What is a fitting gift to give this king, the heir to the throne of David, the son of God, the Messiah of Israel? What could possibly be fine enough ... or useful enough ... to give to such a one?

In 1899, a man named Henry Van Dyke wrote a story called “The Other Wise Man,” a story that I’d like to share with you this morning as we think about what kind of gifts we ourselves should lay before the newborn King.

Van Dyke’s story tells about a fourth wise man, a Magi named Artaban. Artaban, too, wants to travel with Caspar and Melchior and Balthazaar, to follow the star that proclaims that a King has been born in Israel. Artaban, too, has gifts he plans to present to the newborn King, three immense jewels: a sapphire, a ruby and a pearl.

Artaban has sold everything he owns to buy these gems and to prepare for this journey, to find the King who will end the strife between life and death, between light and darkness. He waits only to try to urge more of his fellow Magi to join the quest. And it is this waiting that causes him his first complication.

Artaban sets out late from the mountains of Persia, heading for Babylon, where he is to catch up with Caspar, Melchior and Balthazaar, who have gone on ahead. Artaban has failed to convince even one of his fellow Magi to make the trip, so he sets out alone, riding hard and fast on Vasda, the swiftest of his horses. Day after day they push toward Babylon, over mountains, through ravines, across open plains.

Finally, Artaban draws near to the place where he is supposed to meet the other Magi. But there, in the middle of the road, he sees a man lying, unconscious. He stops, dismounts, and discovers that the man is a Hebrew, very ill. Artaban pauses for a moment. He has the physician’s skill necessary to heal the man, but it will delay his journey. What should he do?

Artaban decides to tend to the man, and in a few hours, the Hebrew man regains consciousness. When Artaban tells him of his quest, the man shares the prophecy that the other three do not know...that the king will be born not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. Artaban, grateful, hurries to the meeting point to share the news. But Caspar, Melchior and Balthazaar could not wait for their comrade. They have already set out for Israel.

Without their caravan, Artaban cannot travel. He turns back toward Babylon, sells his sapphire, and buys a train of camels and supplies so he can make the journey alone. Already, one of his gifts is gone.

After a long time, Artaban comes to the small village of Bethlehem. In the market place, he asks if anyone has seen his three companions. A woman with a two year old boy hiding in her skirts remembers seeing them, remembers that they visited with a family from Galilee.

“But the travellers disappeared again,” she says. “We were afraid at the strangeness of their visit. Then the man of Nazareth took the child and his mother that same night secretly, and it was whispered that they fled to Egypt. Ever since an evil feeling hangs over the village. They say Herod’s soldiers have some plot in waiting.”

She invites Artaban to her house for a meal, and as they eat, they hear cries of terror in the street. Herod’s soldiers have come, with orders to kill every boy child under the age of two. Artaban rises. His height and breadth fill the doorway of the little house. The woman and her son cower behind him in the shadows. A group of soldiers approaches, and Artaban glares at the captain. “I am alone in this place,” he says. “And I am waiting to give this jewel to the captain who will leave me in peace.” In his hand, the ruby glistens like a great drop of blood. The captain snatches it and they leave. So Artaban saves the woman and her little boy, but he is no closer to finding the King he seeks so desperately. And all that remains for his gift is the one great pearl.

Years pass. Artaban travels to Egypt, then to Alexandria, then to Galilee, then back to Jerusalem again. Always, it seems, he has just missed his chance, just lost the trail of the King of the Jews. But though he finds no King to worship, he finds many people to help. Sick folks who need his healing touch. Hungry folks who need food. Innocent people to be freed from prison. Artaban stays busy.

Finally, after more than thirty years, he enters the gates of Jerusalem once more. It is Passover, and the city is rumbling with excitement. Three men are to be executed on a hill called Golgotha. Two are famous criminals. The other is an itinerant preacher, a man that Roman governor Pontius Pilate has dubbed “The King of the Jews.”

Artaban’s heart beats unsteadily. Is this what he has spent a lifetime searching for? Is this the promised King at last, but a King who has been rejected? Could this be the child born in Bethlehem so long ago? He follows the multitude toward the city gate, praying wildly that he might use his pearl to ransom the young man before he dies.

But just at the gate, he sees a group of Macedonian soldiers dragging a young girl down the street. She looks at him and recognizes a Magi from her own country. Tearing free from the soldiers’ grasp the girl throws herself at Artaban’s feet, pleading with him in their own language to save her from a life of slavery.

Artaban stands stock still, confronted with the same old dilemma. Should he give away this last gift, this pearl of immeasurable wealth, to save one girl? His heart is torn in two. But then the answer comes like a lightning bolt to him who sought for years for the one true light: To rescue the girl is a true deed of love. And is not love the light of the soul?

He hands the pearl to the soldiers. He buys the girl’s freedom. And in that moment, a great earthquake shakes Jerusalem. People flee in terror. Artaban and the girl crouch, helpless, beneath the wall of a house. And then a tile falls from the roof, striking Artaban an enormous blow on the head.

The girl embraces him as he breathes his last few breaths. And as she holds his head, she seems to hear a distant voice whispering -- a voice like music in the distance, when the tune is clear but the words are lost. But looking around she sees no one. Then Artaban’s lips move. He speaks to someone the girl cannot see.

“Not so, my Lord!” he gasps. “When did I see you hungry and give you food? Or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when did I see you sick or naked or in prison? Thirty-three years I have looked for you, but I have never seen your face, or done you any good deed.”

And then the voice comes again, and this time, the girl hears something, faint and far away, but clear as a running stream. “Truly I tell you, Artaban, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lights the pale face of Artaban like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain peak. A long breath of relief exhales gently from his lips.

His journey ended, his gifts accepted, the Other Wise Man greets his Lord and King.