

Sermon for ABC January 4, 2026
“We Three Kings”
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (read before sermon)

Introduction

Good morning,

I hope I find you well today as we wrap up our Christmas series. We have been digging deeper into some of the songs we sing at Christmas. Our goal has been to understand these carols better, to know their history and context, and to begin to carry their messages anew in our hearts. I hope that this has been a helpful series for you, and that many of these songs will bring a fresh sparkle to your soul when you hear them next time.

Our song today is “We Three Kings”. This was the first really well-known American carol. It was written by an episcopal pastor, John Henry Hopkins, Jr., for a holiday pageant at his church in Pennsylvania in 1857. It was so well received that he had it published a few years later (in 1863). Over the years, “We Three Kings” has become a core part of nativity traditions around the world.

Of course, this has not been without controversy since we don’t know how many visitors there were, they were probably not at the stable that first night, and they were probably not kings... The controversy has led some people to argue that they don’t really belong in our Christmas celebrations at all!

This nativity set was given to our family by Katilyn’s Mammaw (her grandmother). I noticed the first time we set it up that it was missing the wise men. Here they are on the box – but at some point Mammaw put them somewhere else. We think she wanted to be accurate to scripture – because if you read closely, you read that the wise men come, not to the stable, but to the *house* where they were staying. Now they are lost...and, I don’t know, but that feels a bit sad to me.

One thing that has challenged me this Christmas season has been an internal struggle between being right and being at peace. Christmas is such an emotionally charged season. We all have visions, or expectations, about how we should celebrate, what songs to sing and when, how and when to decorate, whose family you visit, and a dozen other decisions.

We all have an idea inside us of what the “perfect” Christmas looks like. I’m guessing they don’t all line up very well. And as a culture, we put so much weight on this season that we can get very defensive if it looks like it isn’t going the way we wanted. And when it’s over and we are cleaning up the mess it can be very easy to look back and feel a bit disappointed – or even angry, about how it all went down.

I found myself working through these emotions a lot this year and it has me thinking that the controversy about the wise men might be more of a symptom than a problem in and of itself.

So, while I am going to spend some time this morning working through some of the arguments and controversy surrounding the part of “We Three Kings” in our Christmas traditions, I can’t help wondering if we put too much weight on being right about it. Perhaps this is what Paul calls a foolish controversy in Titus 3:9

But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. - Titus 3:9

Let us remember that our enemy really likes it when we fight among each other, and he sows dissensions and envy and pride at every opportunity. So let us be wise and do our research, and strive to learn what we can, but let us also be shrewd and wary of traps.

Would you please pray with me?

Now, when it comes to the gift bearing visitors, I think one reason for all the opinions and arguments is that we actually know very little about them – and what we do know brings us more questions than answers. The Bible does not name or number the them – but the Greek word is plural – so there must have been more than 1. We know from Matthew that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and that they said that they came to worship the newborn king because “we have seen his star in the heavens”.

Everything else – and there is a LOT of everything else, is guesswork and legend. The orthodox church settled on three wise men by at least the 6th century – one representing each gift – but some traditions name as many as 12 of them.

Kaitlyn's Mammaw was not the first one to notice that the wise men show up at the house, not the stable. And some have suspected, by reading between the lines, that Jesus could have been as old as two at the time of their visit. We glean this because Herod inquires of the wise men what time the star appears over Bethlehem, and he then orders that his soldiers kill all of the baby boys who are 2 or younger. It is from this murderous edict that Joseph and Mary and Jesus flee, taking refuge in Egypt until Herod dies. (Matthew 2:13-18)

Following this line of reasoning, the church traditionally celebrated this story on epiphany – January 6th – rather than on Christmas. But Christmas has become such a cultural behemoth that every other special day in this season has been merged into one and for many people the 3 Kings are just another part of the story.

Of course, there is also the question of what to call them: Kings? Wise men? Magi? Saying Magi is the most accurate – since that is the Greek term, but what on earth *is* a magi? That isn't a word we use anywhere else in English!

Well, as best as we can tell, magi were from Persia or Arabia. They were not kings, although they may have worked for one. They were astrologers – stargazers who made predictions about the future based on the movements of the planets – for this reason they were called magi, or mages, or magicians. They were probably not what you or I think of when we hear the word magician – but that is the root word.

At any rate, they were learned men; scholars who were very familiar with the Hebrew scriptures (our Old Testament) which would have been in circulation in Persia at the time. They may have even been the descendants of diaspora Jews – like Daniel. For this reason, “wise men” is probably the best translation of “magi”.

But then.... where did the three *kings* come from? Is this just an early miss-translation? I don't think so. You see, one of the reasons Matthew tells us so little about the Magi – their names, where they came from, or even how many they were, is that he had another agenda, another purpose for recording that part of the story.

You may already know that Matthew wrote this particular gospel for a Jewish audience and thus his focus was on establishing the Jewish link to Christ. Important foreign visitors who bring gifts to the new king had a long Jewish history. The queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon, for example, and there were prophecies about kings bringing gifts to the messiah.

Like here, in Isaiah 60:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

And in Psalms 72:

*May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.*

So, you can see how the idea of “kings” or at least king-like people bringing gifts would have fit in nicely to a Jewish understanding of the messiah’s birth.

John Henry Hopkins, Jr. would have known about these scriptural connections, and certainly by his time the three kings had long been a part of the celebration of Christ’s birth. There is some historical evidence that they were depicted as kings as early as the 6th century. The point is, Christians have been including the wise men, or the 3 kings, in the season of Christmas for a long time.

There are deep theological reasons for us to remember this story at the time we celebrate Jesus’ birth. I would argue that these theological reasons are much more important than arguing about whether or not to put the kings next to the shepherds in a nativity set. Our ancestors made the connection early on that the gifts were prophetic, and the verses of “We Three Kings” highlight these theological ideas beautifully. So, for the rest of our time this morning I want to unpack these verses and try to see what John Henry Hopkins, Jr wanted us to meditate on each time we sing his song.

The first verse simply sets the scene

*We Three Kings of Orient are, (that is, they come from the east)
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain,
Moor and mountain,
Following yonder Star.*

The grammar isn't great, but it makes the rhyme work, so that's OK.

Next comes the refrain – which is a kind of prayer – It takes a step back from the story and connects to the audience, inviting them to pray along with the three kings that God would, like the wise men, guide us to God's perfect light.

*O star of wonder, star of light,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.*

The 1st verse and the chorus are what most people know by heart – and these two together make for a fine song, but it is the next four verses that pack a punch.

Verses 2, 3 and 4 were originally written to be sung as solos – with three singers playing the parts of the three kings. The 1st of the solos describes the gift of gold as one worthy of a king who reigns over us forever:

*Born a King on Bethlehem plain,
Gold I bring to crown Him again,
King for ever,
Ceasing never
Over us all to reign.*

The 2nd solo describes the gift of frankincense – used by priests in the temple – as one worthy of a holy God – and it emphasizes Christ's divinity.

*Frankincense to offer have I,
Incense owns a Deity nigh:
Prayer and praising
All men raising,
Worship Him God on High.*

The 3rd solo describes the myrrh – which was a kind of embalming fluid used in burial rituals. It emphasizes Christ’s humanity and foreshadows his sacrificial death and burial.

*Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;—
Sorrowing, sighing,
Bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

The final verse was designed to bring all 3 voices together in climactic conclusion.

*Glorious now behold him arise;
King and God and sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Sounds through the earth and skies.*

The song begins at Jesus’ birth and ends at his death and resurrection. It could be an Easter song as much as a Christmas song. This is part of why I love this part of the Christmas story.

The journey to Bethlehem and the birth and the stable and the shepherds all speak to the humble birth of our savior. They remind us that God emptied himself to walk among us. But the story of the three kings reminds us that our savior came with a mission we can barely understand. Hopkins reminds us that Jesus came intending to die for our sins and that he rose victorious over sin and death. It was the promise of freedom from sin, the promise of forgiveness and reconciliation, the promise of hope and peace that Jesus brought us at Christmas. His gift was infinitely more valuable than gold or frankincense or myrrh. His gift is the priceless hope of the world walking in darkness that has seen a great light.

As we wrap up this service today, we will, at last, sing “We Three Kings” together. And I hope it will stick with you as you reflect on the season as it wraps up for the year.

But before we sing that song together, I want to share one more song with you, a more modern take on Matthew 2 that follows the same arc, but does it musically and lyrically in ways that I think we can appreciate more today than some of the language from 160 years ago. This is “One King”, by Point of Grace.