

Grace and peace are yours my friends, from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Happy New Year my friends in Christ; may our time together in the New Year be guided by the Holy Spirit, filled with joy in service, and blessed with gifts and talents that might be offered to others for the sake of the One Holy Family we are – together in Christ.

Today's gospel is a most familiar text, to which I might add: too familiar. The story of the wise men's visit is recorded in only one place in Holy Scripture and most all the details we celebrate about the story have no biblical foundation. The Gospel of Matthew does not identify the number of wise men, but we want to 'speculate' there are three because of the three gifts that are named.

To research the origin of the traditions associated with the 'wise men' is to find legends that have evolved over time, in which nations (surrounding the region) all participate in and treasure dearly. The closing words of the gospel are; "and having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." This is the last we hear of the 'wise men' in Holy Scripture.

Approximately 500 years after the death of Christ, the Christian Church in Syria, Ethiopia, China, and what is now India documented the names, garments, gifts, and descriptions of the wise men...and...elevated their position to kings. From this point on, the tradition and details grow to take on a life of their own to where the Magi become the focus of divine action instead of the very fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

To conclude the story of the Magi, Marco Polo wrote of his adventures around the world and in 1270 AD writes, "In Persia is the city of Saba (in Iran – south of Tehran), from which the Three Magi set out when they went to worship Jesus Christ; and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. And above them there is a square building, carefully kept. The bodies are still entire, with the hair and beard remaining."¹

The story ends with the remains of the wise men permanently enshrined behind the high altar in the Cologne Cathedral in Germany a hundred years before Marco Polo writes about them. Their final resting place is constructed of wood, overlaid in gold, silver, 1,000+ jewels and beads and relief figures on the sides that include the Life of Christ, the prophets, apostles, and more. When the shrine was finally opened in 1864, it was found to contain the bones of Philip I, Archbishop of Cologne along with some of his personal items.²

My dear friends in Christ, you might ask, "why the history lesson on the wise men?" I share and pray in this New Year, our gracious God open our hearts, minds, and eyes to the truth of His Word alone. I pray that our faith leads us in truth and spirit to the meaning and message of God's work in the world today for the sake of everyone's peace, prosperity, happiness, comfort, and abundant life.

The gospel text of the wise men's visit to worship and offer gifts to the Christ child is a fulfillment of the prophetic words of Isaiah, recorded in the 60th Chapter and 6th verse; "Vast caravans of camels will converge on you, the camels of Midian and Ephah. The people of Sheba will bring gold and frankincense and will come worshipping the Lord."

When we combine the Word of God recorded in Isaiah with the Word of God recorded in Matthew, we find there are an unknown number of people who come from the kingdom of Sheba. We also find there are faithful people who allow the Spirit of God to move their hearts and travel to worship a newborn king. We find

¹ Marco Polo, Polo, Marco, The Book of the Million, book1,

² <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2016/10/13/the-shrine-of-the-three-kings-in-cologne-cathedral-is-the-largest-reliquary-of-the-middle-ages/>

God is tending and caring for all His people in all corners of the world by sending a Saviour and King that will reign forever.

My friends, when we look at the gospel text, the truth of God's Holy word, we see God opening the hearts of people in a strange land, we see His sheep of another flock, we see the unity of God's world, kingdom, and plan being revealed to human life. This is the Good News and the New Life we are called to see and experience.

Ok, for those who know me well, you know that I loved listening to Paul Harvey on the radio, specifically his series titled, "The Rest of the Story". Paul always ended his program with a twist that people never knew, realized, or connected. And here is the 'rest of the story' in our gospel today.

The words of Isaiah are indeed: "Vast caravans of camels will converge on you, the camels of Midian and Ephah. The people of Sheba will bring gold and frankincense and will come worshiping the Lord." And my friends hear the Word of God as recorded by Jeremiah in the book of 1 Kings; "When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. Arriving at Jerusalem with a great caravan, with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold and precious stones... And she gave the king 120 talents of gold, large quantities of spices, and precious stones. Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.

It might sound as though Isaiah's words match the offering to Solomon better than what was offered to the Christ child. However, this is not about quantity but rather purity of heart, faith, and trust. Solomon was a great King of Israel and was offered a great treasure by the people and kingdom of Sheba. The same kingdom and people watch and wait with Israel for the coming of the Messiah; and when the time is fulfilled, they again bring their treasures to the King.

The pure, unembellished, and true story of the wise men is more beautiful than anything human nature can design. Yes, it is true the wise men did return to their countries and lived out their lives. However, to say anything further is speculation and the beginning of another distraction 'away' from the truth to what God has given us.

The wise men followed their hearts, their faith, and the Holy Spirit that has been fulfilling God's Word since the very beginning. The image of the wise men, the three kings, and the traditions in the cultures around the world are valued and celebrated. However, the images must always point us back to the true and complete meaning within Holy Scripture. In as much as the wise men were faithful, obedient, and led by the Spirit, so you too my friends are as great as the wise men of Matthew's Gospel.

The Spirit leads your life, directs your words, actions, and thoughts to accomplish the work started when God's Word spoke the first promises to humankind. As our New Year takes root and the 12 Days of Christmas concludes; when you remember the wise men, consider remembering the kingdom and people of Sheba in the same thought. You see even today, there are those waiting, watching, and looking with a pure faith, love, and trust at the Christian Church, knowing that Christ will return... and their chests are already filled with the treasures God desires most.

The greatest gift God wants from each of us is our love and compassion for each other in our hearts through Jesus Christ our Lord, who leads us home to our Heavenly Father with the guidance of the Holy Spirit where there *is* peace forever that passes all understanding. Amen.