

“How Many Gifts Did the Wise Men Bring?” January 4, 2026
Matthew 2:1-12 Westminster, Greenville
2nd Sunday of Christmas Ben Dorr

Last Sunday, our family was in Texas visiting my wife’s father, and so last Sunday morning, we went with my father-in-law to his Methodist church in Texarkana. At that service, the pastor shared something that I had never heard before.

After he shared it, I found myself wondering how in the world I had never heard this before?

Do you know that song about the 12 days of Christmas?
On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree...

You know the song.

The pastor shared that when the song was written, hundreds of years ago, each of the gifts were intended to stand for some part of the Christian faith. For whatever reason, I did not know this.

So the partridge in the pear tree is supposed to be the gift of Jesus Christ to the church, where Jesus is the partridge and the pear tree is the cross.

And the second day of Christmas, two turtle doves...that’s the Old and New Testaments.

On it goes, through the 12 days of Christmas.
I won’t go through the list with you right now.
You can look it up when you get home.

But it does call to mind that we are still in the season of Christmas.

Today is the 11th day of Christmas. We're two days away from Epiphany, which is why the text that you just heard is about the visit that the wise men made to Bethlehem, to the home of Jesus, long ago.

And not that you're even thinking about this yet, but today we are exactly 3 months away from Easter, 12 weeks from Palm Sunday, when Jesus enters Jerusalem and marches straight toward his crucifixion on Good Friday, which is only 89 days away!

Hmmm...

Is anyone here thinking about Good Friday on this 11th day of Christmas?

I know that's not where my mind wants to go today.

I don't want to talk with you about Good Friday.

I want to talk about this past Friday, because I have some terrific news to share with you.

As of this past Friday, we reached our stewardship goal for 2026, raising over \$300,000 more in pledges for the coming year than we had for this past year.

Friends, I cannot begin to express my gratitude to you and how proud I am of you. Your generosity, your commitment to the mission and ministry of our church...it just continues to astonish me. I am so grateful to serve such a generous church, with such a splendid staff.

This past Friday was the 9th day of Christmas.

But when Lynn shared the news with me, it felt like Christmas morning all over again.

What a great way to start the new year!

Which brings me back to Good Friday.

Why on earth would anyone bring up Good Friday when we're still celebrating Jesus' birth?

Did you notice that whoever wrote the 12 days of Christmas song...they allude to it right away? The pear tree...stands for the cross...

But whoever wrote the song had biblical support.
Because Matthew does the same thing.

Wise men from the East come to visit Jesus.
How many gifts did the wise men bring?
That's an easy question.

The answer is...three.
Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold and frankincense come straight from the prophet Isaiah.
They're mentioned in the first passage we heard this morning.
Very appropriate gifts to bring the newborn king.

But what about the myrrh?
Isaiah says nothing about myrrh.
Make no mistake, myrrh is no baby shower gift.

As most of you know, myrrh was used for embalming dead bodies back in Jesus' day.

Do you see what Matthew is up to here?

By telling a story in which wise men bring myrrh to the baby Jesus...Matthew is prepping us for the death of Jesus, reminding his readers that Good Friday is less than 3 months away.

Why would Matthew do such a thing?
Why did Matthew include the myrrh?

Will you take look at Good Friday with me, just for a moment?

When Matthew describes the scene in chapter 27, with Jesus crucified on the cross between two bandits, verse 45 begins like this:

“From noon on, darkness came over the whole land...”

Stop right there.

The darkness is another connection with our story for today.
Because what is today’s story about?
It’s the story of Epiphany, God’s light coming for the Gentiles.
Wise men traveling, following the star...but when is it easiest to see the star?

At night.

In the midst of darkness.

At the birth of Jesus, we have the wise men traveling in darkness.

And at the death of Jesus, we have inexplicable darkness.

Some say the darkness on Good Friday must have been an eclipse.

Others say it was the hand of God.

Whatever it was, Matthew knows that in each of our lives of faith, we will also, at times, be confronted with inexplicable darkness...

Not divinely ordained darkness.

Not “God has a plan” and God sent the darkness.

Just darkness...

If memory serves, it was my junior year of high school when I was first introduced to the great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. In my English class, the teacher assigned a chapter from Dostoyevsky's novel, "The Brothers Karamazov."

The chapter is called *The Grand Inquisitor*, and along with the preceding chapter, it presents an argument against a line of theological thought that you and I still hear a lot about today.

The line of thought is this:
Everything happens for a reason.

That even the worst events of this world happen for a divinely planned reason, even if we don't know what that reason might be, even if we cannot discern God's perfect plan...

Have you ever heard that before?
Dostoyevsky disagreed.

He was a Christian, but he did not believe that everything that happened was somehow morally mandated by God...and I suspect part of the reason he believed this is what happened in his own life right before he wrote "The Brothers Karamazov."

On May 16, 1878, Dostoyevsky's 2-year-old son died.

His name was Alyosha, the same name that Dostoyevsky gives to the protagonist in his novel.¹

And even though the novel itself is about much more than the death of Dostoyevsky's child, it is—at least in some small part—that great Russian novelist's way of unleashing his grief,
shaking his fist at God,

¹ Karl Ove Knausgaard, "The Light of 'The Brothers Karamazov,'" *The New Yorker*, October 21, 2025.

and crying out:

“What is the meaning of this?!!”

“How could you let this darkness happen to me?!!”

I think that’s the first reason why Matthew mentions the myrrh.
Because he knows that it’s not only Jesus who encounters darkness
in his life of faith.

So do we.

Whether it’s a struggle with addiction,
or your body has betrayed you,
or an accident took place in a loved one’s life,
and no one can theologically explain it to you...

Matthew’s point in connecting these two stories is NOT to say that
the darkness is part of God’s plan. It IS to say that God walks with us
through the darkness.

That the darkness has not extinguished the light of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor once described
the events of Good Friday
not as “something God *desired*
but as *something God suffered*.”²

I think Matthew would agree.

² From “The Will of God,” by Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.

No matter what darkness you've walked through in your past, or whatever darkness you may be muddling your way through right now, it does NOT mean that the darkness is what God WANTS for you.

It does mean that God is right there with you.
That's the first reason Matthew mentions myrrh.

But it's not the only reason.

Go back to Good Friday one more time.
Do you remember what else Matthew writes about that day?

Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!"

"He saved others; he cannot save himself."

And you know what?
They were exactly right!
Jesus could not save himself.

It means that he was just as dependent on God...as you and me.
It means that he was just as helpless...as you and me.
It means that ONLY GOD could save him.

Look, how many of you have been asked by someone else from another faith tradition...have you been saved?

I'm sure you've heard that question before.
And I've told you how I answer that question, right?

Someone is usually looking for a date when they ask that question.

So I say that I was saved by Jesus on a hill called Golgotha two thousand years ago.

Now that's a good answer.

It's a theologically sound answer.

But this morning, I'd like to add something to that answer.

If we're following Matthew closely, I think he would say that God continues to save us....every single day. After all, God wasn't just saving Jesus at the end of his life. God was saving Jesus right from the very beginning of his life.

Why did the wise men take another road home, after visiting Jesus?

Because God came to them in a dream.

How did Joseph know to get out of town and flee to Egypt?
God came to him in a dream.

If neither of those things happen, Herod could have killed Jesus before he turned three years old!

God was intervening in the life of Jesus, coming over and over again to give new life to Jesus...just like God is relentless about giving new life to you and me.

Getting back to our trip to Texarkana last week, when we were in my father-in-law's church, after worship was over, I asked him about the chapel.

Does your church have a chapel?

Yes, he said...don't you remember?

That's where we waited right before we entered the sanctuary for Sandy's funeral.

Ah yes, that's right.
How could I forget?

You see, as I've mentioned before—Sandy, my wife's mother, died shortly after our first son was born.

It was 19 years ago this month.
We were living in Indiana at the time.

And the joy and the excitement that came from being new parents...it was, needless to say, all mixed up with the sadness and the grief that came from Sandy's premature death.

A time in our lives filled with light...and a time filled with darkness.

So we flew to Texas for the funeral. And one of my lasting memories of that service is what happened right after the funeral finished.

We were standing the Narthex, greeting everyone who had come to the funeral...it was just a slew of faces, many of whom I did not recognize and had never met.

Not a big deal, just keep shaking hands.

And then, I reached out to shake the next hand, and suddenly I was looking at faces that I DID know. Friends of ours from when we had previously lived in Dallas—they heard about Sandy's death.

And they had made the trip.
They took off work.

And they came to the funeral.
And that meant the world to us.

Why?
Because they decided to be light...in the midst of our darkness.

That's the THIRD reason Matthew mentions the myrrh.

Not only because God suffers with us,
and not only because God saves us...
but also because God SENDS us...

And God sends us not to the well-lit places of our world, but into
the darkness.

Where someone ELSE might be hurting.
Or vulnerable.
Or suffering.
Or alone.

I asked at the beginning of this sermon how many gifts the wise
men brought, and everyone here, including your pastor, said there were
three.

That's what we're taught from an early age.
Three gifts.
But I'm not so sure we've got it right.

You see, the wise men didn't just bring gold, and frankincense, and
myrrh.

They also brought themselves.

They risked a long journey to a foreign land...and they were one of God's lights, in the midst of Herod's darkness...

Do you think the same kind of thing could happen with you?

What if your new year's resolution this year was to find someone who is currently living in darkness, and don't try to fix them.

Just show up for them, and be God's light.

If you did that, what WONDERS do you think God could do through you?

(Amen.)