

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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What Else did the Magi Bring?

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The Text: Matthew 2:13-23

The Flight to Egypt

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." 14 And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

Herod Kills the Children

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:
18 "A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be comforted, because they are no more."

The Return to Nazareth

19 But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." 21 And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. 23 And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."

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Our lives are one continuous narrative. That is our lives, recount and tell a story. This story is varied in theme and plot as it unfolds day by day. As Christians one of the things that is so important for our faith, is that we understand our narrative is not some random story but is part of God's story and so fits into His Story. When we live our narrative our in light of this larger story than there are connections that can be made between the biblical narrative/story and our own narratives.

In the passage from Matthew two we have a very familiar narrative, made up of three scenes. As we look at verses 13-23 I want to ask the question and then answer it; "What else did the Magi Bring? These three less familiar gifts were left because the Magi heeded the angel's dream and went home by another road. Their obedience spawned Herod's rage and so provided the opportunity for three other gifts to be given.

1. Joseph was given the gift of knowing the Father's presence and providential care.
2. The people of Bethlehem were given an understanding that God knew their pain and would lead them out from that pain.
3. Jesus was given the gift of obscurity and vulnerability which in turn would be used to save the whole world.

So let us look at each of these three gifts:

1. To Joseph, was given the gift of knowing the Father's presence and providential care.

Verses 13-15 use a technical literary device. It is called analogical writing. Analogical writing expresses an analogy, naming a thing after something else. This is what we have here. The story of Joseph taking Jesus and Mary into Egypt is analogical to the story found in Genesis, where another Joseph goes into Egypt. It is from there that God shapes together a people, the Israelites, who are then called out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, under the leadership of Moses.

Here set some 1800 years later from the first Joseph narrative is depicted the Holy Family going down from Bethlehem to Egypt. Remember that Matthew was writing his Gospel to Jewish Christians and so they would have seen clearly the parallel between the Joseph of Genesis and the Joseph of Matthew.

Let us think about the journey described in Matthew 2. From Bethlehem to the Egyptian boarder was a 120 kilometres trip. Once in Egypt the family probably settled for three

years in the city of Alexandria. This city lay on the Western Edge of the Nile Delta and had a Jewish population of close to 1,000,000 people.¹



Here we have described something of God’s providential care. The word providential is an adjective that qualifies the noun “care.” Something that is providential is under the guidance and control of God, even though from our human perspective we might not always see this. This is something both of the Joseph stories emphasize for us.

In the Genesis story the reader could conclude that these are nothing more than a series of random events. Joseph is sold by his brothers to Midianite slave traders. He goes down to Egypt where he is framed by Potiphar’s² wife, who accuses Joseph of seducing here. It was the other way round. He ends up in jail, eventually is released because he can interpret dreams. He becomes Prime Minister of Egypt and on the story goes. At the very end of the story when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers listen to what he says:

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today”.

This is an expression of God’s providential care. God was working through the narrative of this family’s life to accomplish something of importance and significance for countless millions of people. But in the outworking of the narrative this is not something readily known by the characters in the plot. As the readers we see it, to a degree Joseph understands it, but Joseph’s father Israel, and the eleven brothers have no idea of the larger purpose God has in mind, until they are re-united with their Egyptian brother Joseph.

We see a parallel occurrence in the Matthew’s Joseph story. In his case guidance was made clear through dreams. What is important as we look at the passage is that in each case Joseph is obedient to the guidance he received. This is stated in verse 14: 14 “And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt”; verse 21: “And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel”; verse 23: “And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth.”

What is important to underscore is the way Joseph willingly responded to the promptings of the Lord through his dreams. Although I can imagine in the course of these trying

¹ Michael J. Wilkins The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2004) page 110

² Potiphar was an important government official in Egypt.

times Joseph did not always understand the implications of the directions he was given, he chose to be obedient.

Such obedience is only possible when we have an understanding of God's providential care and guidance. The writer of Hebrews speaks of this very thing when in the 11th chapter he writes of Abraham:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going

Here is the same pattern as we see with Joseph. Abraham also went out in obedience by the prompting of God; but he did so, not knowing where he was going. Do you understand that to have a high view of God's providential care does not mean we always understand what is happening to us?

Oswald Chambers in his devotion My Utmost for His Highest has written this on the November 7th entry:

The circumstances of a saint's life are ordained of God. In the life of a saint there is no such thing as chance. God by His providence brings you into circumstances that you cannot understand at all, but the Spirit of God understands.

To live such a way is not easy because it does require of us trust and discernment. Can you imagine what it must've been like for Joseph and Mary, who had lived in a town of no more than a thousand people, to find themselves in a metropolis the size of Alexandria that had a million Jewish inhabitants alone? What a change from Bethlehem.

We are invited to think of our own narratives when placed in the narrative of Matthew are not random, even though it can appear to us to be so. Rather there is one whose providential care is at work guiding and directing our lives as he incorporates our stories within his larger narrative framework.

2. The people of Bethlehem were given an understanding that God knew their pain and would lead them out from that pain.

Now there is something very important when we think about the providential workings of God. God's providence does not deny that human willfulness can be used to terrible and destructive ends. And yet, even when such purposes seem absolutely meaningless, they play a part in the larger outworking of God's will. This is something that is so often rejected by people as nonsense because they ask; how can a caring God allow such atrocities to happen? It is due in large part to the theme of obedience. Just as Joseph was willing to be obedient to the messages he received, Herod chose the path of disobedience and so caused some forty or so families in the environs of Bethlehem to suffer greatly.

The text Matthew is quoting is from Jeremiah 31. The original context of this passage was set some 600 years before the Bethlehem incident. Ramah was a town some 8 km

north of Jerusalem. It was from here at the time of the Babylonian captivity in 597 BC that mothers were separated from their sons, with the sons taken by the powerful Babylonians to a land some 750 km away. As the sons were taken into exile the mothers left behind are inconsolable.

Matthew is using analogy again to tie the Bethlehem story to the exile story. Interestingly he only quotes verse 15. Verse 16 goes on to say:

Thus says the LORD: "Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears,
for there is a reward for your work,
declares the LORD,
and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.

There is expressed here a promise of a homecoming. The point that I think we are to take from this is that to have a high view of the providence of God does not immunize us from suffering. Indeed the Old and New Testaments are full of stories that speak of the depth and intensity of suffering. And yet from the perspective of faith, even when we feel beyond consolation, we are still invited to have hope.

Indeed the whole of our Lord's life speaks of the depth of anguish and the despair of the cross, and yet as we know it is not the end. It was because Paul was able to always see suffering in light of the hope of the Resurrection that he said with such confidence in Romans 8:

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written,

*"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."*

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul in no way diminishes the reality of suffering and its intensity. But because of our hope in a providential and sovereign God we believe that nothing in our narratives can separate us from this love and cares for and is guiding us.

In the 17th chapter of Book I of Jean Calvin's **Institutes of the Christian Religion** the Genevan reformer uses the following illustration to discuss the providential care of God in the midst of great hardship.

When the sky is overcast with dense clouds, and a violent tempest arises, the darkness which is presented to our eye, and the thunder which strikes our ears, and stupefies all

our senses with terror, make us imagine that every thing is thrown into confusion, though in the firmament itself all continues quiet and serene. In the same way, when the tumultuous aspect of human affairs unfits us for judging, we should still hold, that God, in the pure light of his justice and wisdom, keeps all these commotions in due subordination, and conducts them to their proper end.

Having considered how Joseph was given the gift of knowing the Father's presence and providential care; and how the people of Bethlehem were given an understanding that God knew their pain and would lead them out from that pain, we now turn to the third gift.

3. Jesus was given the gift of obscurity and vulnerability which in turn would be used to save the whole world.

I think it interesting that in the Providence of God, Jesus did not remain in a city of 1,000,000 Jewish inhabitants but was directed by the Father to leave the metropolis of Alexandria with Joseph and Mary for the town of Nazareth. It had a population of only 500. As well, it was not a place people admired. Indeed Nathaniel asks the question in John 1: Can anything good come from Nazareth? This is a rhetorical question that begs the answer "no".

And yet it is to this place that in the providence of God Jesus spends 25 years of his life. These were years marked by obscurity and smallness. This is interesting to think about. Matthew says at verse 23: *And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled: "He shall be called a Nazarene."*

Interestingly there is no place in the Prophets where this quote exists. Therefore at the end of the passage rather than write something analogous with the Old Testament Matthew has a play on words. By using the words "He shall be called a Nazarene" Matthew has a double meaning in the expression "Jesus the Nazarene."

On the one hand, Jesus is the fulfillment of the hope for a messianic nesar—the "Branch" from the line of the line of David.

In Isaiah 11:1 – 2 we read these words:

- 1 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
- 2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Jesse was the father of King David. The stump of Jesse images the line of David as being cut down as the result of judgment. And yet from the stump there is a branch that will bear fruit. Now the Hebrew word for branch is "neser" which has the same root as

Nazarene. In other words Matthew wants his readers to identify Jesus as the one who is the fulfillment of the Isaiah prophecy. To call Jesus the Nazarene speaks to us of something that God is concerned with in our lives too. You see within the providential purpose he looks for us to be a people on whom the Spirit of wisdom and understanding rest. As we live out our won narratives what matters most to God is how we are growing in wisdom and in the fear of God. This is so different from the values of the world, which are pre-occupied with status and power, prominence and influence. The story of Jesus suggests to us that some of God's most influential work happens in settings that are obscure and seemingly unimportant. For it was in the town of Nazareth where Jesus would have come to understand his vocation as the Messiah of Israel as he read scripture, prayed and was given the insight from his Father of his full identity.

On the other hand, Jesus' association with lowly Nazareth gives notice that his coming is not in glory but in humble surroundings. As the Branch from the royal line, Jesus would be "hacked down "a stump and reared in surroundings guaranteed to win him scorn. Used by his followers, the expression "Jesus the Nazarene" denoted faith in him as the messianic deliverer (Acts 2:22;10:38), but used by his enemies, it was title of scorn to deny his messianic identity (Matt. 26:71; Mark 14:67).

22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know (Acts 2.22).

38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. (Acts 10.38)

*71 And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." *Matthew 26:71).*

67 and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." (Mark 14.67).

Here is another thing about how our narrative ties into the Jesus narrative. There are some who when they hear the name Jesus like us know his true character and identity. There are others who speak of the Nazarene with contempt and scorn. As we think of the story as it is found here in Matthew 2 this can encourage us to persevere when in the presence of the contemptuous. It is all within the Providential workings of God that Jesus be from Nazareth and so adored by some and abhorred by others. And yet this was all part of the story of how God was, is and will save those whom he has made.

Conclusion:

As we have considered this narrative in Matthew 2 and seen what else the Magi brought I invite you to think how to personalize these three gifts. May you prayerfully consider how this narrative can help you see that:

You are given the gift of knowing the Father's presence and providential care.

You are given an understanding that God knows your pain and will lead you out from that pain.

You are given the gift of obscurity and smallness which in turn can be used by God to further his saving work as we trust our narrative to his providential care.