A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1–12: The Visit of the Magi

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, He inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.” Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the Star’s appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.” After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Focus Questions

1. Who came to Jerusalem? What were they looking for? Why?
2. Why do you think King Herod, the priests, and the scribes were troubled to hear of the birth of a new king of the Jews?
3. Where did the prophecy say the king of the Jews would be born?
4. What did King Herod ask the Magi to do? What reason did Herod give for this request? Do you think Herod was being honest about what he planned to do? Why or why not?
5. What led the Magi to the newborn king?
6. What gifts did the Magi give?
7. Why did the Magi not return to King Herod?
The Gifts of the Magi

Directions: Sing together the Christmas Carol “We Three Kings” as a class. The Three Kings is another title for the Magi. Afterwards look at the painting The Adoration of the Magi by Matthias Stom and read the reflection on the gifts of the Magi. Then answer the questions.

We Three Kings

We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar.
Field and fountain, moor and mountain
Following yonder star.

Chorus: O Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy Perfect Light.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain
Gold I bring to crown Him again.
King forever, ceasing never
Over us all to reign. R.

Frankincense to offer have I
Incense owns a Deity nigh.
Prayer and praising, all men raising
Worship Him, God most high. R.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes of life of gathering gloom.
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb. R.

Glorious now behold Him arise
King and God and Sacrifice.
Alleluia, Alleluia.
Earth to heav'n replies. R.
Reflection on the Three Gifts

The tradition of the Church says that the gifts of the Three Kings hold a particular meaning or symbolism. Gold is precious, a worthy gift to pay tribute to a king. However, the meaning of frankincense and myrrh are more mysterious because we don't typically use these two perfumes or oils anymore.

Many ancient cultures used frankincense during their religious ceremonies. It is an aromatic resin used in incense, and the priests of the Jewish Temple used frankincense to incense the Tabernacle where the Holy of Holies was kept. Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod, and a pot of manna, until the Ark of the Covenant was lost in the Babylonian Exile.

Myrrh is a gum or resin that in ancient times was very valuable, worth even more than gold. While it too was used as incense and for medicine, it was also used as an anointing oil to embalm dead bodies. St. Augustine describes the symbolism of the three gifts this way: “Gold, as paid to a mighty King; frankincense, as offered to God; myrrh, as to one who is to die for the sins of all.”

1. Think about the meaning of each the three Magi’s gift. Use the carol and the reflection to describe how each of the three gifts was a fitting gift to give to the Christ child.

Gold:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Frankincense:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Myrrh:
________________________________________________________________________
2. Which Magi is holding which gift in the picture?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. Look at the posture and expressions of the three Magi in the picture. What attitude do the three Magi have as they give their gifts to Jesus?
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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. Why do you think the boy on the right side of the picture is holding the Magi's crown?
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5. The Christmas season still continues in the Church! In what way can we imitate the three Magi and give a special gift to Jesus?
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