

# The Treasures of the Nations

January 18, 2026

This week's message is titled "The Treasures of the Nations." Thank you to Rhonda, Gloria, Jim, Ed, and Ashley for participating in the service. The scripture readings are Ephesians 2:14-20, Leviticus 20:27, and Haggai 2:6-9.

## Scripture Reading

### Leviticus 20:27 (NIV)

“A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.”

### Haggai 2:6-9 (NIV)

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the Lord Almighty. ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty.”

## Sermon

### The Treasures of the Nations

Those of you who have some awareness of the liturgical calendar might know that Christmas is a season, not a day. Christmas is a twelve day festival (partridges and pear trees optional!), and the holiday we tend to perceive as a single day – December 25 – is the first day of a celebration that is meant to last twelve days, culminating in another holiday on January 6, Epiphany. Epiphany – it means revelation, and it commemorates the day that God's glory, in tiny Jesus, was revealed to the nations. So while today's message might give off vibes of being a Christmas sermon in January, it might be more accurate to say that it is an Epiphany sermon.

There are a lot of aspects of the Christmas story that bog us down, for a variety of reasons. We get bogged down in familiarity. We get bogged down in the details of songs and retellings which may or may not be present in the biblical text. We get bogged down in the texts' own details, trying to reconcile the stories in Matthew and Luke. In some Churches of Christ we've gotten bogged in whether we should observe Christmas at all.

But then there are a number of other places. Places where we should let ourselves run aground. Places where we should willingly pull over and set up camp. Places where we have not spent nearly enough time, too lost in the minutiae to realize that in the Christmas story, we have texts with particularly strong echoes and resonances throughout scripture. What we are going to see is that, from the perspective of first century Jews, a people they never wanted (1) fulfilled numerous Old Testament texts in ways that they never would have imagined (2) to glorify a king they never envisioned (3).

## A People They Never Wanted

So lets look at these gift-givers. Many have observed that the bringers of gifts to Jesus were not kings. But here's another thing they weren't: they weren't wise men. The bumper sticker that says, "wise men still seek him" is a lovely sentiment, but no wise men sought him in the first place. Matthew calls them 'magi'. Magi were Zoroastrian priests likely hailing from what is now Iran. They not only served a pagan god, but practiced various forms of magic, most especially astrology. These men were not so much counsellors or advisors or learned professors, but more like the proprietor of the crystal ball gazing and palm reading shop that I shake my head at on my way to church.

That didn't go down any better with devout first century Jews than it does with us – in fact, probably worse. As we heard read earlier, Levitical law clearly stated, "A man or woman that is a spiritist or soothsayer is to die: you will stone them to death with stones; their blood shall be upon them." Any good Jew would be thinking: "if these guys were one of our people, we would kill them." These are not appropriate adult friends for a believing family's toddler.

And what takes them so far from their homes and their culture, to a humble family in a small town in an occupied Roman province? There is some really interesting speculation, particularly about the influence of the prophet Daniel in Persian society several hundred years before, but we don't have time to get into that, and scripture doesn't actually tell us. We don't know what drew the Magi to Jesus, except for a star and the call of God on their lives. But perhaps the greater mystery is not that they came "at Christmas," but that Christmas came for them. God allowed his Son at his most vulnerable to be seen, to be adored, by such as these. Hadn't the manger been humble enough? Hadn't the shepherds been smelly enough? Wasn't an unwed mother shameful enough? Was God's holy Son now to be looked upon and cherished by the wicked? What was the look on Mary's face when she answered the door and some rich foreign astrologers asked if she had a minute? And as if their very presence isn't strange enough, they come with immensely valuable gifts: gold and two kinds of incense: frankincense, commonly used in priestly rites, and myrrh, used both in priestly rites and in funerary rites.

## Fulfillment They Never Imagined

So we've looked at the arrival of a people the Israelites never would have wanted, now let's look at fulfillments of scripture they never imagined. What I want to look at is not the meaning of each gift, but the significance of the Magi bringing these gifts.

The Old Testament is very often perceived as being only concerned with a single people group. And it is true that in the Old Testament, something unique is going on between God and Israel. But there

are a surprising number of texts where we see the participation of non-Israelites not just welcomed among Israelites, but involved in some way in the worship of Israel's God.

Psalm 72 is a psalm that seeks God's blessing upon Israel's king. Among these blessings, we read, "May the kings of Tarshish and the coasts and islands bring tribute, the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. Let all kings bow in homage to him, all nations serve him." These nations mentioned are distant lands of fabled wealth – an over-the-top kind of blessing. A comparable modern sentiment might be, "May the mayors of New York and London come with treasures for Beamsville".

But that's a psalm – a poem – and a blessing to a king, written in a culture where it's normal to speak of kings and to bless kings in grandiose ways. For something a little more objective, we turn to the prophets, in particular to Isaiah 60, as was read for us this morning. And I'd like to look at a few things in verses 5-7, "You will see and be radiant, and your heart will tremble and rejoice, because the riches of the sea will become yours, and the wealth of nations will come to you. Caravans of camels will cover your land: young camels of Midian and Ephah, all of them will come from Sheba. They will carry gold and frankincense and proclaim the praises of the Lord." That should sound not only like the story of the Magi's visit – even referring to two of the three gifts – but also should point us back to the reference in Psalm 70 to the fabulous wealth of Sheba. Unimaginable gifts from incredible distances are going to be brought by God's people into God's house. Verse 7 goes on to say, "All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered to you; the rams of Neabaioth will serve you, and go up on my altar as an acceptable sacrifice. I will glorify my beautiful house." Again, these are references to foreign gift-givers and foreign gifts. Secular trade is one thing – even an insular nation like Israel had foreign trading partners – but here we learn that foreigners will be a key part of how God chooses to make his house lovely. At first glance, it's kind of surprising. What do foreigners have to do with Israel's God? But if we think back to some details of other Old Testament texts, we really shouldn't be surprised.

And these are texts that, at first, might not seem to need fulfillment at all. Texts that we assign to the category of 'history' and 'story'. Almost anytime something is built for God's glory, the treasures of the nations are present. In the book of Exodus, we read at great length of the plans for and the building of the tabernacle. Moses collects gifts from the people for the building, and the people give what they brought from the Egyptians (Exod 12:35-36; 35:5-9; 36:3-7). When Solomon builds the temple, he builds it with cedars from Lebanon, through an agreement arranged with the wealthy foreign King Hiram (1 Kgs 5:6-11). After the exile to Babylon, Cyrus sends people home under the direction of Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple, and it is furnished by the Persians (Ezra 1:4-11) and a generation later it is refurbished, yet again out of the Persian treasuries, in Ezra's time (Ezra 7:14-20, 27).

You may think I've gotten off track here. This has been a lot about a building, and Baby Jesus wasn't a roof and four walls. And yet the image of temple remains a major metaphor in the life of Jesus. The one who referred to his body as 'the temple' (John 2:19-21). The one whom Peter would call the cornerstone of a temple built not by humans, but out of humans (1 Peter 2:4-6). It is in Jesus, and then later in the church, that the dwelling of God is best and most truly realized.

But there's a fulfillment of one more text that I'd like to spend not nearly enough time in. Not exactly a history, not exactly a prophecy: it kind of defies our categorizations and sensibilities. Zechariah 6 takes place in the first few years following the return of God's people from exile to Babylon. A

relatively small number return specifically to rebuild the temple under the political leadership of Zerubbabel, and the spiritual leadership of a high priest named Joshua. And in Zechariah 6:10-12, God gives a very odd instruction to the prophet Zechariah:

“Take an offering from the exiles, from Heldai, Tobijah, and Jedaiah, who have arrived from Babylon, and go that same day to the house of Josiah son of Zephaniah. Take silver and gold, make a crown, and place it on the head of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. You are to tell him: This is what the Lord of Armies says: Here is a man whose name is Branch; he will branch out from his place and build the Lord’s temple.”

There are so many questions here: why are we shaking down returnees from exile for their silver and gold? Why are we making a crown, when there's no king in Israel? Why is the person we're crowning the high priest? In Israel, priests can't be king and kings can't be priests.

But these men who have returned from exile in Babylon have brought gold and silver – the treasures of the nations, you might say. Crowning a descendant of David would make sense, but be treason to the Persian empire. But crowning a priest is simply silly . . . until you read the book of Hebrews, where we are told that Jesus is both priest and king.

And even the name of this high priest is fascinating, this man named Joshua. Because if you translate the name 'Joshua' from Hebrew into Greek, you get . . . Jesus. In Zechariah 6, the treasures of the nations are brought into the temple for the coronation of Jesus the priest king. It's a dry run for what we see in Matthew 2: actual foreigners, greater gifts, and a greater king.

So we've seen that a people the Jews never wanted fulfilled their scriptures in ways they never could have imagined. And this is for the honour of a king they never envisioned. So let's look at that king for a minute.

## The King They Never Envisioned

The Magi go to Jerusalem in search of a king whose astrological omen they have discerned far, far away in their own country, and followed to Judea. They show up in a kingly place (Jerusalem), talking to a king (Herod), looking for a future king. You look for kings in kingly places; it makes good sense. But this is not a king like has ever been anticipated.

Let's go back to Isaiah 60:2 for a moment “Darkness will cover the land, and gloom will cover the peoples, but Yahweh will shine upon you, and his glory will be seen by you.” In the Christmas story, when the angels first appear to the shepherds, why do the angels come at night? Is that a simple detail? Does the divine glory of angels show up better at night than on a sunny day? Or could we have here a physical reminder of the many darknesses that cover the land. The darkness is everywhere. There is an absence of the word of the Lord, and has been for 400 years. Corrupt religious leaders manufacture rules that make people's lives more difficult. The office of high priest is not occupied rightfully by a descendant of Aaron, but is a position that is bid for and bought like a commodity. And an evil empire controls the land: forces people to carry the weapons of their own oppression. Builds military installations wherever they feel like it. Flexes administrative muscles and sends a young couple on a cross-country trip to pay taxes. Foreign soldiers stand at the checkpoint; Jesus is born in occupied Palestine.

When the Magi reach Herod, they ask the question, “Where is the king of the Jews?” It says that Herod was afraid, and all Jerusalem with him. But I think these are two very different sorts of fear. Extrabiblical texts document that Herod was paranoid. He built fortresses for himself in every direction from Jerusalem in case he had to flee. He killed a wife and three sons whom he believed were plotting against him. And what's more, he's an Edomite who rules at Rome's pleasure. From a Jewish perspective, he's a usurper. From a Roman perspective, he's a puppet. This man's hold on power is far more tenuous than any king would like. That's why Herod's afraid. So why is Jerusalem afraid? Because fearful people with great power tend to do scary things. I am sure we can all think of people whom we believe to have far more power to wield than they do wisdom to use it well. If Herod thinks there's another king out there, who knows what he might do? Even worse, if Rome thinks there's another king out there, what destruction and terror might they bring to keep an upstart province firmly under their boot?

Who is God going to send into this darkness? How is God going to show his power and glory? How is he going to save and deliver?

God is going to . . . SEND IN THE BABY!!!

Herod is afraid of . . . a baby.

The Magi are going to pay homage to . . . a baby.

God's glory is going to be contained in . . . a baby.

A baby born to a poor couple, who will soon be on the run for their lives. Because when dangerous men wield power without wisdom, people end up on the run.

A baby is no one's idea of a winning strategy.

But in the midst of this story woven in such dark and somber tones: the danger of the evil empire and the mad puppet king, the terror of a family on the run and a little town sold out of baby-sized coffins, there are moments of dazzling light. The glory of God is revealed in a baby in a house in a small town, to foreigners who have travelled hundreds of kilometres to bring the treasures of the nations to the temple of God. Yes, the treasures of their gifts. But maybe also the treasures of themselves. Because it is people by whom God's house is glorified.

This is Epiphany, the revelation of God's glory: that a baby-shaped Saviour came into the darkness not only for his own people, but for peoples who were distant, for people like the kooky crystal ball gazers, condemned by their own practices and Israel's law. Christmas came for people like you and me, to bring us, as the treasures of the nations, into God's house.

And if we have been brought in, what responsibility do we now have to continue that work? What are we doing to see the treasures of the nations brought into God's house? That's a question, a responsibility, that I hope every church wrestles with, perhaps especially in Canada where we are quite warm to multiculturalism. Perhaps especially in southern Ontario where so many immigrants settle. But let me say particularly to this congregation: you have a very special role and opportunity that most of us can only dream of. You have been placed here by God just down the road from a building that is filled with the treasures of the nations. Great Lakes Christian High School is full of souls from China and Canada and Korea and Haiti and Japan and Nigeria and I'm sure Amy could

tell us exactly where all from this year. The best and the brightest of the world's young people. You watch the treasures of the nations walk through these doors and into your lives every week. How are you stewarding these treasures? How is God using them – and using you – to “glorify his beautiful house”, as Isaiah put it?

Because this is the goal. We are gathered together so that we may gather others. Isaiah looked forward to a year of the Lord's favour when the sick would be healed, the mourners comforted, the poor included in good news, the captives liberated. And the apostle John, Isaiah's greatest interpreter, sees that vision realized among a countless company of people from every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 7:9) who add their wealth – their very selves, in all their wonderful diversity, to God's house, to become God house together. John sees a spiritual city where people “will bring the glory and treasure of the nations into it” (Rev 21:26). May such be true of us now, in preparation for that great day. Amen.

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