

The significance of the Nativity

Written by By Sean Wells Contributing Artist
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The Nativity, El Nacimiento in Spanish, translates to “The Birth.” Such a classic image is so very familiar to us that we almost cease to really see it. We have all seen the story of the little town named Bethlehem where the baby Jesus was born, signified by the star burning brightly overhead and drawing shepherds and kings alike to pay respects to the coming King of Man, retold yearly by parades of grade-schoolers in awkwardly fitting costumes, singing sweetly. Like many images in the Christian tradition, this one creates a space for symbolism to tell a richer story.

Each character presents another aspect to consider. But, the Three Wise Men, Kings from the East, always fascinated me the most.

Bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, these mighty rulers knelt before a tiny newborn in a hay-covered barn. That is such a powerful image of humility that is sorely lacking in today’s images of world leaders. But, what do these gifts signify? The three innocuous items leave room for a foretelling of the life of this child that is to come.

King Melchior brings the gift of gold. Gold maintains the same meaning now as it did then, and as it did a thousand years ago to the ancient Inca people. It is a symbol of wealth and royalty, a metal that never tarnishes or corrodes and is both malleable and rare. It foretells of a king like we’ve never seen before.

Melchior is often depicted wearing a gold cape to represent the gift he bears.

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Frankincense, brought by King Caspar, is also rare and difficult to harvest, sourcing from coastal Arabic tree bark. The ancient Greek writer Herodotus tells of a venomous snake that commonly guards the trees and needed to be smoked out to gain safe access. The snake will come to represent the devious and dangerous existence of the fallen-angel-turned-underworld-overlord Satan. Perhaps it is appropriate he would guard the access to gifts for God.

The incense, with its woody scent, would be burned and offered in various religious and spiritual rituals. It signifies an access to communicate and honor a deity. It is a premonition of Jesus' role as a conduit for man to talk to Jesus' father, God, and his duty and honor to sit at the right hand of his father. Caspar is depicted wearing a green cloak with hair of brown.

Myrrh, brought by King Balthazar, is another resin harvested from a thorny tree and translates from old Arabic to "bitter" representing the taste of this coveted incense. Because it was historically an important part of both Hebrew and Egyptian funerary rites, it is associated with death and cleansing. The thorny tree that bears the resin hints at the crown which Jesus wears upon his death on the cross that would come to represent suffering for his kingdom. The story of death that follows the smoke of myrrh tells of the sacrifice that Jesus will make to pay for the sins of man.

But, as in many spiritual images, the death icon not only represents the pain of loss, but also a rebirth and cleansing, and even a forgiveness. Balthazar is often depicted as Black, having come from Africa, and wears a cape of purple, signifying his royal status.

All three kings were made saints for their efforts. Interestingly, like the kings who carried them, all three gifts have restorative and healing properties. As you make your final selections of gifts to share with your loved ones for the holidays, I hope that this image of the Nativity warms your home and reminds you that the gifts we give to one another embody a moment of consideration for that other person, where they came from, who you see them as and who you hope they will become. Have a blessed holiday and enjoy coloring this image of the month!

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