

The Gifts We Bring - Gifts of the Magi and those we bring, too!
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-16

Little three- year- old Sam was sitting in the back seat of the car with his Mother around Christmas time. As they passed by the Episcopal Church in their neighborhood, where a manger scene was in the yard, little Sam asked about who the people were. "That is Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, there in the manger," Sam's Mother explained. A few blocks further on down the road they passed the Lutheran church, where a scene was depicting the journey of the Wise Men, otherwise known as the Magi. "Who are they?" little Sam asked. His mother replied, "Those are the Wise Men, who are looking for the Baby Jesus." Little Sam replied that the baby Jesus was at the other church and they should look for him there.

The annual observance of the birth of our Savior continues until January 6th the day of the Epiphany. Because the feast of Epiphany falls in the middle of the week this year, we celebrate this day today at our worship service. The twelve days of Christmas always begin on the 25th of December; therefore, Merry Christmas as we continue to celebrate! And, today, we recall another part of the Christmas story that we see at many a nativity scene and Christmas program - the visit of the Magi or "Wise Men".

This story doesn't get much traction on Christmas Eve or Day itself because the Wise Ones were not actually at the manger on the birth of Jesus, but instead visited Jesus later when he was a toddler, probably when he was two years old, and not in a manger of course, but in a house. It has brought about some interesting confusion over the years and in fact led to some surprise at the last confirmation class I taught. But, to be fair, it isn't as if the church has helped with this confusion very much. After all, we encourage the confusion by including the Wise Men at the stable and manger at every Sunday School Christmas pageant. What a great opportunity then to be able to hear this story today as told by the Gospel of Matthew, the only account that tells of the foreign visitors from afar.

A lot of legends have grown up around this story of the wise men and their journey to find baby Jesus. They are not at all in scripture but they have become myths to romanticize the story that is in the Bible. For instance, we often assume there were three of them, but we simply don't know that at all. Scripture doesn't suggest a number at all, that there were necessarily three of them...or five or ten or thirty for that matter. The idea of there being three of them came probably from the three gifts that were given to Jesus: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. One comedian, I can't remember which one, has suggested that there were actually four Wise Men, but the fourth one's gift was fruitcake, so he was not allowed in.

But, the legends of old have even gone so far as to assign names and personal descriptions for the wise men. As early as the Middle Ages, these three were given names. The mythology goes that the first magi was named Caspar, who was young, beardless, with a ruddy complexion; then there was Balthazar who was a bit older, dark-skinned with a short beard; and finally Melchior -old, grey hair, had a long beard. Folklore or legend bring us the names and the characteristics of the three wise men, but actually, we really have no idea how many wise men there were and we surely do not know their names. Scripture does not seem to find that important. What was important was that these wise ones found it necessary to make the journey.

And, they were not royalty. Magi were most definitely *not* Kings. In the bible Matthew calls them "magi from the East." So, what were they? They were probably highly educated astronomers and astrologers which explains why they would have noticed and then been so excited about coming across something unusual in the night sky. As they would later say to Herod, "*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.*" It was common in that day to believe that heavenly signs marked the births and deaths of great leaders. What these men saw excited them, even enough to make them drop what they were doing and follow the star. And, it must have been some amazing celestial happening, too.

There are some wonderful lessons on this holy visit for us to heed today – for these three or however many met God in the midst of doing what they usually do. They met God while they were attending to their vocations, their work. They were people called to keep track of the stars and it is in that way that God called them to pay attention. This shows us that God is not limited to meeting with us in a certain place, such as church, or at a certain hour, meaning 8:15 AM & 10:30 AM, or as today at 10:00AM. God can and does speak to us anywhere and anytime in the midst of daily life, if we are able to listen. As the Wise ones listened through their daily lives, it reminds us to also be alert for God when God comes to us, no matter when and where that is.

Another lesson gained from the wise men comes from their willingness to take action. They could have noted the appearance of the star in their log books; noting that there was something special, but then do nothing but note it; but they don't. These men put commitment to their conviction, and they prepare for a very arduous, long, and no doubt very dangerous journey to meet this awaited Messiah, a Messiah that was not even of their own kin or nation.

And, that makes me wonder about when God presents us with new opportunities, are we willing to consider those new possibilities and begin a journey of faith? Here at the start of a brand new year, often people's resolutions have to do with losing weight...why not resolve to put your faith into action instead, as the Wise Men did? God will no doubt present you with new opportunities for 2022. It's a given. How will we respond? The story of the Magi says there is something important that awaits us in our journeys. The world continues to be a place that needs us as the called out ones, the people of the Good News. That is needed even more today than ever.

And, lastly, the gifts given to Jesus give us a clue to ourselves. And this is lesson number three: the gifts we give to Christ are not unlike the gifts the Magi gave Jesus. Let's look at the gifts the Magi

gave Jesus on the day of their visit and compare them to our gifts to Jesus.

First gift: Gold: A pretty amazing, expensive gift to give. In our lives, what if we would translate gold not into jewelry, but like the Magi, we translate it as our wealth. Our wealth is rather important to us. It is often a stumbling block for us. Jesus knew this and in the bible he tells us over and over again how hard it is for us to manage money and keep it in proper perspective. But here these Magi gave Jesus of their wealth freely. It is a very costly gift, one that enables Mary and Joseph to get by while fleeing to Egypt. By doing so, the Wise Men teach us to consider our use of wealth to the service of the Christ Child.

Second gift: Frankincense. Frankincense was burned in the temple as a symbol of prayer. It was also used for healing. Believe it or not, it is still used for healing. It was used to bring down inflammation and today new studies show that taken as a supplement according to a doctor, it helps reduce the inflammation of arthritis. But, frankincense is also like incense. In your prayers this New Year of 2022, let God hear your hopes and dreams for healing. Let your prayers rise to God like the incense frankincense. And, like frankincense, use your gifts for healing this community and this world.

Third gift: Myrrh, a spice used by the ancients as medicine and for embalming. Tradition says that this gift was given in anticipation of the suffering, death, and burial of Jesus. Perhaps it was also given as encouragement to us, to teach us to bring to God our sorrows and sadness, our depressions and despair. In doing so, the healing process begins. Gold, frankincense and myrrh: These are wonderful gifts given to Jesus that teach us something about how to live. They are gifts they brought and also represent the gifts we may bring God and the world. You never thought there was so much to learn in such a short bible story, did you!

So, the confirmation teacher in me will now review: Lesson 1: Just like the Magi, be ready to encounter God in the midst of your everyday activities, then get up and respond. Lesson 2: Put action to

your following Jesus. If God sends you to follow a star or rather care for the poor, help the neighbor, or work on your prayer life, ask God to help you follow through. Lesson 3: Use your gifts to follow Christ. The Wise Men are good examples of what those gifts are: Giving from our means, working towards healing for ourselves and the world God made, and bringing our sorrows and need to God.

Where is the light of that star leading you at the start of this New Year? At the moment, like the star that stopped, it rests in front of you, and, as we might expect, it leads us to Jesus. May God bless you richly and in wonderful new ways as you, too, follow the star to the Christ child!

Let us pray.

O God, we are grateful for the leading that you continue to give. Lead us in the New Year to love widely, to forgive freely, and to care deeply. Help us to be willing followers of your Word and your Way. We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen!