

“Gifts”  
Matthew 2: 2-12

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According to the liturgical calendar, this story is out of sequence. The story of the wise men, the magi, is supposed to be read as an epiphany scripture which is January 6th. But I don't think I'll ever become accustomed to reading about the wise men days after Christmas has been observed. And because January 6th doesn't always land on a Sunday, sometimes this story gets skipped completely, as it would have been this year. Next week's reading is Matthew's oh-so-lovely tale of how King Herod slaughtered all the little children who were aged 2 and under because he felt threatened by the king of the Jews for whom the wise men searched. It just so happens to be my scripture text for my first Sunday preaching at Trinity—I'll be off to a great start, eh?

Anyway, the story of the wise men is too important to skip over, because it contains so many meanings. It's a story that reminds us all to be alert and wise to the beckonings of God, in whatever form those beckonings appear to us—stars or evil kings or dreams or angels. It's a story that teaches us what seems impossible in our world, is completely possible in God's world. It's a story that encourages those who seek God in this life but who are frustrated by what they see around them: the bitterness of the world, the sadness in society, the hopelessness that hovers over so many lives. For them God places a star in the heavens, brighter and clearer than any other star and asks them to look up. Look up and have hope that the light has come into the world and the darkness will not overcome it and lives can change.

But there's a more familiar meaning in the story of the wise men, and it has to do with gifts. Matthew tells us that once they had found the Christ child, the wise men opened up their treasure chests and gave him gifts. They gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold, which was and still is, a precious metal; frankincense, which was used by the priests in the temple as part of worship; and myrrh, which was used to anoint bodies after death.

These gifts are not the usual things one gives a baby or toddler. That was beautifully and hilariously illustrated in the video clip that Jamie Dreussi showed at last week's reception. Entitled “Christmas According to the Kids” by the Southland Christian Church, there were a lot of great moments in that video, but I loved the part when the little girl explained that the wise men brought gifts—a stuffed purple hippo, diapers and wipes, and some milk.

Truly, those gifts would make more sense than gold, frankincense and myrrh!

It's natural to wonder why the wise men didn't bring more practical gifts to a baby. But in Matthew's story, the gifts aren't about what a baby needed, but who the baby was. Alyce McKenzie writes, “Their gifts are ordinary gifts one would offer to a king: gold has great value; frankincense is a perfume; and myrrh is a common anointing oil. The gifts have symbolic significance in light of the identity of the baby to whom they are given. Gold is a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (used for incense) is a symbol

of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) is a symbol of death. The gifts they brought to honor the baby speak of their respect for his divine identity and their realism about his death at the hands of humankind.”

The wise men’s gifts tell us that In the shadow of violence and fear, Jesus is our gift of Lordship and peace.

The wise men’s gifts tell us that when we are threatened by lesser gods and idols, Jesus is our gift of the One True God.

The wise men’s gifts tell us that in the face death and suffering, Jesus is our gift of eternal life.

God so loved the world that God gave a gift which enables us to stand secure before the strongest and fiercest earthly powers, not to be led astray by lesser gods or idols, to have confidence that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

These gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are meant to remind us of who Jesus is as we make our way in the world, but these gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh also to remind us that as Jesus’ disciples we embody those gifts of security, steadfastness, and confidence. As God gave God’s son to the world, so we, as Jesus’ disciples, give ourselves to the world, and by so giving, make the world a better place.

Someone told me that Christmas was a terrible time for a minister to leave a congregation. I disagreed (of course I would!)

The story of Jesus’ birth is the story of God’s gift of love to a people whom God loves, and for 23 years, this congregation has served as gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh as you have embodied the wise men’s gift to the Christ child. You trusted God and established a downtown Presbyterian presence in this place, opening your doors and your hearts to all who have come to worship here. You have cared for the least and the lost, proclaimed the good news to those whose lives were difficult, instructed and guided infants and children as they grew up in this community of faith. You have anointed the sick with your healing words, comforted those who grieved, prayed for those who suffered. For 23 years, it has been a privilege and a joy to see the gifts of Jesus Christ at work in this place, in this community, in our nation, and in our world. This congregation—together with those who have died and now wait for us on another shore—has been reflected the wise men’s gifts. You are the light of Christ, the aroma of Christ, the peace of Christ and you have made the world brighter, the community more fragrant, this building a place of quiet rest. For 23 years, the members of this congregation have been a beautiful and joyful gift to me, to Will, to our entire family and we will cherish the time we have spent with you. At baptisms and funerals, confirmation days and wedding days, communion which is always an adventure, in hospital rooms and living rooms, in moments of incredible joy and times of great despair, you all have been a

gift to our lives. To paraphrase a poem by eecummings, “we carry your hearts; we carry you in our hearts.” But not only have you been a gift to our lives, you have brought the gift of the good news of Jesus Christ into each others’ lives. You have embodied the wise men’s gifts as you have faithfully followed Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior. You have embodied faith and hope and love.

Today, through this story, we are reminded that wise men brought gifts to Jesus, gift of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Those gifts stood for strength and hope and life. Those gifts represented light to people who walked in darkness. Those gifts would bring joy to those who know sorrow, freedom to those who were oppressed, peace to those who live in violence. Those gifts meant healing to those who suffer and eternal life to those who face or fear death.

On this Christmas Day, we have received God’s greatest gift of love in Jesus Christ, and so we, too, have received the wise men’s gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. May we continue to enjoy these gifts, giving thanks for these gifts embodied in the members of this congregation, and sharing the wise men’s gifts with each other and with all whom we meet.