

## **An Epiphany of Gifts**

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*Matthew 2:1-12*

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Christmas seems long ago. The packages are unwrapped; thank you notes hopefully are all written. If the tree and decorations are still up, at least we're thinking about putting them away. Yesterday, however, was Epiphany – the twelfth day of Christmas – when we celebrate the magi's visit to the Christ Child in Bethlehem. In Matthew's gospel, we're given a wonderful mini-drama involving magi from the East going to King Herod, who sends them on to Bethlehem, since that was the long foretold place of the messiah's birth. But Herod's MapQuest assistance was provided to the magi through clenched teeth, as subsequently revealed by his ordering the massacre of all infant males in hopes of destroying the newborn king.

In many ways, the Epiphany story is a revolutionary tale about a clash between the powerful on their thrones and those living on the margins of society. And at the heart of it all is the mystery of incarnation, God's choice to be with us – no, God's choice to be one of us. If I try to unpack all the subtleties in Matthew's narrative, this sermon will soon become abstract and hard to follow. We need to focus ourselves on a few details of this story to keep our restless minds from wandering too much. I suggest we begin with the gifts, coupled with some of the legends about the magi created long ago by the church to help make this story come alive. It's true that not all these details are found in the bible, but that does not necessarily make them any less true, for to paraphrase Hamlet, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your [biblical critical] philosophy."

On that day long ago in the city of Bethlehem, the infant Christ child received three visitors. The first to arrive was the venerable figure of Melchior: aged, white-haired, slow of step but still quick of mind. In his hands he carried the gift of gold. Gold hasn't changed much over the millennia. It represents wealth and power, the symbol of kings who sit on thrones with their crowns and scepters of dominion over their subjects. This gift calls into the question how we use our wealth – as individuals, as a church, as a nation. Melchior sets the gift down and then glances up at us, sadly noting that our eyes covetously focus on the box and not on the child to whom the box was given. In that simple act, a fundamental truth was revealed. Placed side by side, where does your gaze rest – on the gold of Melchior or on the Son of God? Seeing them in the proper order makes all the difference in the world.

Next to arrive was the young king, beardless Gaspar, carrying his gift of frankincense. His was a gift of rare incense long associated with sacred spaces and holy cathedrals. It is the gift of worship, turning any place into holy ground. Worship might happen

standing shoeless before a burning bush or seated on a mountain hillside hearing the beatitude “Blessed are the poor, for of such is the Kingdom of God.” Worship might happen under a tree in Tanzania, in a make-shift shelter at a refugee camp in northern Chad, in a cinderblock building in remote Thailand, in a modern sanctuary in America, even in this cathedral right here. Gaspar sets his gift down and then glances at us. As he opens his container, the fragrance is released and we remember that worshipping God is something more than being present in a sanctuary built of mortar and stone. The holy aroma moves through the air as free as the wind and the Holy Spirit. It is as ethereal as a thought or a prayer, and yet is no less real than things of physical substance. The value of Melchior’s gold was not in its accumulation but in its use in the service of the One who is more precious than all the gold in the world. The power of Gaspar’s gift is not present when it is concentrated within sanctuary walls behind closed doors, but when it is released and goes with us into the world. Our lives of active faith, of love, compassion, peace, and forgiveness carry the fragrance of this magi’s gift into the world so that it might ascend to God’s realm as an offering of praise.

Admittedly much of our attention as a church is focused on the gifts of gold and frankincense. How should we manage our budget and endowment? How do we make sure building repairs are done and how do we coordinate our weekly array of worship services? The risk here is that we make the internal life of this congregation an end in itself. Melchior and Gaspar are outsiders – non-Jews, non-Presbyterians – and we are taken aback when they first stroll down our center aisle and re-focus our attention on the gifts and homage due to Christ. But we would too quickly close the doors behind them, locking them inside these four walls and assigning them to committees for gold-management and frankincense-worthy worship opportunities.

That is why there is always a third magi – Balthasar, who pushes open the sanctuary doors and silently enters, bearded, dark-skinned as fine ebony, carrying the gift of myrrh. Myrrh is also a rare and sacred incense, but its primary use is to anoint the dead. It is the spice of suffering yet also of solidarity. It was placed in the tomb of Jesus, who died on a cross for us all, and its fragrance assuredly lingered in that tomb when the women visited there and discovered how Christ had been raised from the dead for us all. Myrrh reminds us that no one’s pain is theirs alone; the sin of all affects us all, the salvation of each one is linked to the salvation of all. That is why the language of the scripture is almost always plural and clashes with our individualistic, “me-first” modern mentalities. Isaiah 60 says: *Arise, shine for your light has come; the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...and God’s glory will appear over you.* Not single rays but a light dawning over all people – kings and priests, stargazers from the East, Joseph and Mary staying in rented quarters in Bethlehem, rich, poor, black, white, young, old. The light of the world shines upon us all and thereby connects us all. That is why one of Jesus’ most powerful remarks was this: “What you have done unto the least of these members of my family, you have done to me.” That is the message of Balthasar’s gift of myrrh.

Such are the gifts of Epiphany – gold to be used in the service of Christ, frankincense as the symbol of worship wherever two or three are gathered in God’s name, and myrrh, the scent of solidarity and suffering that touches the entire human family. But there is

another meaning of the word 'epiphany.' It can mean the visit of the magi to the Christ child, but it also means a "revelatory manifestation." (Try explaining that to a five year old.) It is when God's divine nature (or at least aspects of it) is made clear to us. In a sudden flash of recognition, in an "Aha!" moment, we suddenly see things differently. An epiphany is when God's being and love and purposes become real to us, when we understand, even just in part, that which is at the heart of our very lives. It happened in the Exodus, when God rescued the Hebrew people from slavery and became their literal source of food, water and life. It happened when King David learned he would not build a temple to try and contain God, but rather his own family and nation were to be a living, ongoing testimony to God. It happened when Jesus was seen in transfigured glory on the mountaintop beside Moses and Elijah. It happened when the crucified Jesus spoke words of hope to a dying criminal on the cross beside him and then offered the prayer, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And it was there when the risen Christ sat at table with disciples and broke bread, tearing it so it resembled a broken body, yet handing it out so that in its brokenness it could be the bread of life for others.

In the revolutionary, radical story of the magi kneeling in Bethlehem, setting their gifts before the Christ child, an epiphany is opened to us. This child of gold, frankincense, and myrrh is Immanuel, God with us. That is both a statement about God's initiative and a summary of the whole of human destiny.<sup>1</sup> God became what we are that we may be made one with God, heirs with Christ, partakers of the divine nature itself. That is a life-changing realization. Remember how scripture says the magi returned home by another road to avoid seeing Herod? That could be read as a metaphor for how their lives were changed by their encounter with Jesus. They too had an epiphany that something different from the world's way had dawned on earth and now they walked by faith on an entirely new route.<sup>2</sup>

In Matthew's gospel, we're told that Joseph and Mary were warned in a dream to flee from Herod's wrath. So at morning's light, they grabbed what little they had and fled to Egypt. I suggest to you that they left behind the Wise Men's gifts. The cynical in our midst might quip that you'd think they would at least take the gold with them, but that only shows how skewed our priorities are and how radical this epiphany is. They did not need to take the magi's gifts; they already carried their perfect embodiment wrapped in swaddling clothes. No, the gifts have been left here with us. During this New Year, may they serve their true purpose and direct our gaze to the epiphany, the revelation of God's will and word and wisdom made flesh, who is Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Goetz, "The Highest Knowledge (Matt 2:10-11)", *Christian Century*, Dec. 21-28, 1983, p. 1176.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Stoffregen, "Matthew 2.1-12 – Epiphany of Our Lord", *Crossmarks.com*.