

The Gifts

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Matthew 2:1-12, 4:1-11

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It was hot that day. The sun's rays fell like lead and covered the desert landscape like a thick, woolen blanket. Jesus was alone. Nothing in his immediate vicinity offered him solace or comfort. There were only rocks, the heat, and the growing hunger pangs in his stomach. Jesus had been fasting for some time now, and his body's need for food was becoming increasingly difficult to suppress.

Jesus wished for something to eat and in that moment of need, sensing a possible advantage, **he** appeared. There was no need to look up to verify his presence. You could feel that unmistakable spirit of darkness and despair as clearly as the midday heat. The Tempter approached Jesus and trying to warp his voice into one projecting an attitude of concern, he said, "I know that you are hungry. If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into loaves of bread. It is certainly within your power to do so and it will take away that nagging ache in your belly. Really, what's the use of heavenly connections if you don't take advantage of them? Allow yourself a few minor comforts in this desolate place; no one will ever find out! Turn stones into bread. Cause a shade tree to sprout up over there. Go on, you deserve it!"

Getting no response from Jesus and sensing his line of reasoning was not working, the Tempter tried a different angle. Sidling up close to Jesus, he spoke again. "A few days after you were born, some wise men from the East came and brought you gifts. Surely Mary told you all about it. The first Magi brought you gold, a sampling of this world's wealth that is available to you. Now I'm not suggesting you'd ever be tempted by greed or covetousness, but why should you suffer needlessly? You're of no use to anyone if you're not healthy. Go about your earthly work if you must, but allow yourself a few comforts along the way. C'mon – change a few stones!"

Jesus looked at the Tempter for the first time, who was reluctant to return his gaze. Then Jesus said, "No, you don't understand. We don't live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." And as the words were spoken, the intruder disappeared.

After a while, Jesus walked around a bit, studying the landscape before him, when he heard the noise of a second pair of sandals rustling the loose gravel near at hand. The Tempter quietly spoke up again. "You're right. Gold is a bit crass, isn't it? Wealth only satisfies the small in spirit. But remember the other gifts you were given in Bethlehem. The second Magi brought you frankincense, that rare, exquisite resin that is ground into a powder and burnt to produce a fragrance fit for You-Know-Who. Its aroma is reserved for the temple Holy of Holies. In being given that gift, it is clear that you're different from all the other creatures on this pitiful, vulgar world."

In a moment it seemed they were both transported to the pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple. The wind gusted past them as their view extended beyond the crowds far below, on to the Kidron valley and the distant hills of Galilee. “Behold, child of frankincense; throw yourself down from this temple height. You won’t be hurt. The angels have promised to guard your every step; they will protect you. More importantly, you will show those people below just who you really are, how holy and special you are. Then they will hear your message as one truly sent from on high.”

Jesus turned away from the edge of the wall and, looking again at the Tempter, said, “No, you don’t understand. It is written that we are not to put the Lord God to the test.” Suddenly Jesus was alone, standing once more among the hot desert rocks.

As the day wore on, the Tempter made a final assault upon Jesus. Perched on a nearby stone, he said, “You’re right once again. Why proclaim your holiness from the top of the temple if the world still hasn’t a hope of understanding it? That’s like casting pearls before swine. If you want to accomplish something in this world, we both know that you need power. All your hopes and plans can only become a reality if you have the power to implement them.”

Again the scene changed. On the horizon, kingdom after kingdom became visible in all their glory. They paraded past Jesus as if blown along by the desert wind. And in every land, people bowed down before him and pledged him their full allegiance. Near to his ear the Tempter whispered, “Remember the third gift you were brought on Christmas Day? It was myrrh, the liquid jewel of the Orient, the sacred oil used to anoint prophets and kings. You were born the King of the Jews. The Wise Men knew it and so did Herod. Why else did he try so hard to destroy you? But as you are now, you’re limited. You aren’t able to travel to the ends of the earth or preach your message to all the people of the world. For that you need me! All this and more I will give you – absolute power on earth – if you bow down and worship me.”

Jesus’ face clouded over and he said sharply, “Be gone, Satan. We are to worship and serve the Lord God only!” Jesus rose and walked over to his adversary. “You don’t understand. Those gifts brought long ago were not bribes to tempt me, but expressions of love. We always give away the most precious things we possess to show our love.”

“Consider the gold. To you it represents wealth – a way to accumulate the luxuries of life that deaden our senses and distract us from what really matters in life. But think again about this precious metal. Its priceless nuggets can be found next to ordinary stones in stream beds. It is a symbol of the wealth of God’s creation, the beauty present in this world’s splendor, whether seen in gold or jewels or flowers or fig trees. The magi brought me gold as a symbol of my incarnation – the beauty of this God-blessed creation I lovingly joined at my birth.

“Consider the frankincense, this fragrance symbolizing the holiness of God. You tried to suggest that receiving this gift meant I was to claim my superiority over others. That I

should throw myself from the temple heights to prove to everyone how angels will protect me. Yet the value of frankincense is not that it elevates us up to God's level of holiness, but that it reminds us how God has come down to our earthly level. God has covenanted to be with us. The incense is a sign of that holy presence in our unholy, sinful world. In that Bethlehem stable, God broke into the world in a new way, bringing divine holiness to us directly. For in order for people to be raised out of sin and despair, God first had to descend to their own level.

“Consider the myrrh, the liquid jewel used to anoint kings. You paraded before me the world's kingdoms and claimed they would be mine if I worshiped you. How little you understand the nature of true power. Those who bow down before earthly powers do so in order that the kings might not see the hatred in their eyes. What ruler sits unafraid on the throne or sleeps soundly at night? The power you offer is an illusion, a flimsy mirage of the desert heat. Myrrh is not only used to anoint kings, but also to anoint corpses. In my end is also my beginning. The myrrh of the magi will become the spice for my tomb. The fragrance eventually buried with me at sunset will be released from its sealed container at sunrise on the third day.

“Yes, Tempter, I remember the gifts brought to me long ago. My mother told me about them over and over again. I appreciate the true value of the gold, frankincense and myrrh left beside my cradle bed. Soon I will reciprocate with a gift of my own. For we always give away what is most precious to those we love. But know this well: On that day just as today, nothing will tempt me from freely giving my gift, my life, for the sake of the world.”

The Tempter knew defeat. Like heat vapors rising from the flat stones of the hot desert, he vanished from sight. And Jesus was left alone once again.

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