

Bearing Gifts

A Sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on January 9, 2022 (Epiphany Sunday)
Friendship Presbyterian Church

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. ²They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."³When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. ⁴He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*⁶You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him."⁹When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. ¹¹They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12, NRSV)

I hope all of you had a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year's weekend! Lisa and I did. We went to Auburn and spent the New Year's holiday with my parents and had a good, fulfilling time, with them, my sister and her family, and with some visiting friends.

All of us together are a pretty diverse lot, but we know that we are one family. In fact, we gather in Auburn every year in those days after Christmas Day, and we come bearing gifts. We bring something of *ourselves* – expressions of who we are and what brings us joy – and share them with one another.

The holidays wouldn't be the holidays without the annual recounting of old family stories and legends ... And of course, Lisa has her latest knitting projects to show and talk about. My Dad always offers his insights into the latest Auburn football goings-on, or asks for my help with his computer, and my Mom and my sister lovingly prepare the sort of New Year's Day dinner I grew up on.

Our sharing with one another at this time of year is done in a spirit of deep gratitude. Something special happens and everyone can see it. It's a way of being that can't be sustained

all the time, but as we come bearing gifts, as we each bring our love, our desire to share ourselves, something sacred happens – and any walls which might stand between us come down.

Today is the first Sunday in a liturgical season which follows the Christmas season and is called “Epiphany,” during which we celebrate the manifestation of God to the world in the person of Jesus. And the biblical story to which the Church has always turned to celebrate this new season is the coming of the Magi – the Wise Men from the East – following a star all the way to Bethlehem.

It is one of the most familiar accounts in the gospels, although – like the *birth* stories of Jesus in Matthew and Luke – we must acknowledge the gap between what the story actually says and what we’ve added to it, or at least have always assumed was there. Our closing hymn today will be the perennial favorite “We Three Kings” – one of my favorites since I was a young boy. The fact that in the biblical text we have no way of knowing how many there were, and the fact that they weren’t really kings, should not detract from our enjoyment of the song:

*O star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light!*

This story has captured the imagination of the Church for centuries. And as such, the traditions surrounding it are as interesting as they are ancient. It was always assumed that there were *three* of them, if only because there are three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The idea that they were “kings” comes from an early linking up of this story with some Old Testament passages which speak of kings coming, bearing gifts, and bowing down before the manifestation of God’s glory. And so, the legend goes, these three kings had names: Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar – Balthasar often represented as a king of Arabia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India.

The Gospel of Matthew calls these visitors Magi, a term which seems to point back to a priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, a religion based on the teachings of the ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster which called on human beings to join the forces of good in the struggle against evil. As part of their religion, these priests had an international reputation for their skills at interpreting the signs in the stars. And so, in the gospel account they see a special star, which tells them that a King of the Jews had been born. They come from far away to honor him. They come bearing gifts. And they return to their homeland.

The embellishments to the story *are* only legend, but perhaps they tell us something important about how the early Christians understood the significance of this event. It’s interesting that these distinguished visitors – drawn to Judea by the star of a newborn King – as not just from another country, but from *beyond the known world* ... truly *global* travelers! Remember that it

was a *Roman* world then, and yet there were lands that had never seen the Roman legions and never *would* ... lands like Persia, Arabia, and India.

But even more remarkable is that, for the early Christians, this trio would also have represented three very different *religious* backgrounds. The Persians were, of course, Zoroastrians. Arabians at the time of the birth of Jesus were a polytheistic people, believing in a variety of gods. And then of course, there was India – a land of 300 *million* gods and a Hindu tradition *already* two thousand years old. As the legend would have it, this was an *interfaith* journey as well!

Perhaps most significant of all, in neither Matthew's account nor in the later legends do these men stay and become Jews. Still less do they remain and become the first Christians! Rather, they come with open hearts and minds. They come bearing gifts. They come to witness and honor the new thing which the God of all nations is bringing to pass in their time. And then, they go back to their homeland, grateful for what they have seen and changed forever by the experience.

Later, the author of the epistle to the Ephesians would write of a "secret plan" of God hidden since the beginning of time, but now revealed by the Spirit, in which God through Christ is tearing down the walls that divide Jew from Gentile, and making those who had before been seen as *outside* God's people, as members and co-heirs of the same body. It was happening before his very eyes, and the world would never be the same. God was doing a new thing.

And God *is* doing a new thing. The work of tearing down the walls which divide us continues, and God calls us to be a part of it! This is a work of the Spirit. It is a call to live into the mystery of the Epiphany.

But living into this mystery today is a challenge like never before. Whereas in times past, our neighbors tended to look like us and to believe like us, today this is less and less the case. We Christians have often known those of the Jewish faith as neighbors, but Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others are also among us. These folks of different colors and different faith traditions are no longer just on the other side of the world, but rather, on the other side of the street, and next door, and in an adjacent cubicle at work, or the next desk at school. We buy from them. We sell to them. We work with them and have coffee with them.

Pluralism is our reality. Today in Athens and in towns and cities like it across this country there are many beliefs, many ways of life, and in these "neighbors" there is a goodness, decency, and humanity we can't deny simply because they are not like us.

Recognizing this may be a challenge. But it is also an opportunity – an opportunity to step out as the Wise Men of old, bearing gifts and journeying into something remarkable. But what gift might we bring? What gift might we bear to these neighbors of many different walks of life?

The Rev. John Philip Newell is one of my favorite spiritual writers. He's a former warden of Iona Abbey, and is a poet and an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland. A number of years ago

he was in conversation with a Native American leader, and he asked, “What is it that I – as a Christian – am to bring to the table of humanity? What am I to bring to our relationship in this place?” The native leader responded very simply: “Philip, bring *your* treasure – *bring Christ*. Would you expect *me* to bring something less than *my* greatest treasure? Would you be satisfied with something less? So, I tell you, bring your treasure. Bring Christ.”

Later, Newell reflected on the conversation, and he wrote these words: “I understand why those of us of [cultural] sensitivity in the Christian household have hesitated from bringing Christ to the table. In the past, he has been used to beat others over the head and to tell them that they need to become ‘like us.’ So, I understand the hesitation. I know why many of us have simply gone silent. But if we are to establish true relationships in the journey of the world today, as distinct cultures and religions and nations, we need to find ways of bringing our treasure to one another. And we need to do it now, with reverence and costly self-giving, if there is to be healing. The treasure we carry is never simply our own. It belongs to the human soul. And in that sense, we are only giving it back. ‘Bring your treasure,’ he said. ‘Bring Christ.’”

He is right, of course. *Christ* is our treasure. *Christ* is the gift we would share as we live into the mystery of what the Spirit is doing today. But it is important that we hear this right ... It is not *Christianity* we share, but *Christ* ... And not the Christ that Christianity has so often presented, but rather the Christ of the gospels:

- Not the militant Christ of crusading zeal, but the Christ who comes as the Prince of Peace;
- Not the pious Christ of religion, but the Christ of real and abundant life;
- Not the proper Christ of the religiously self-satisfied, but the Christ of the lepers, tax collectors, and sinners;
- Not the remote Christ far above the trials of life, but the Christ of the Cross;
- Not the vengeful Christ of condemnation, but the Christ of compassion for the lost, the weak, and the all-too-human;
- And not the Christ of a “cheap grace” which would heal the wounds of our corporate life lightly, but the Christ of a “costly grace” which calls us to *Justice* and *Truth* as the only road to lasting peace.

This Christ is the Christ who died and rose again, triumphant from the dead – *he* is our treasure, the gift we would share.

This holy season of Epiphany calls to us with a special urgency. May we in our time step out as the Wise Men of old, and like them, journey into something remarkable. *We* can come bearing a gift. *We* can come to witness and honor the new thing which the God of all nations is bringing to pass. And at close of day, *we* can go back to our homes, grateful and transformed. May it ever be so.

To the Glory of God! Amen.