

“Gift We Bring”  
By Rev. C. Craig Topple  
Friendship Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, January 5, 2025

[Lectionary Passages](#)

This morning’s message is about our spiritual journeys and the deep longings we have within. How we approach others and how we approach God.

Trasie and I learned of an interesting custom practiced in much of Latin America during our time living there.

Kings Day, or El Dia de Los Reyes, is a very popular holiday, traditionally more popular than Christmas. The custom is to exchange gifts on King’s Day because, that’s when the tradition tells us gifts were presented to the Christ child as recorded in the passage we read from Matthew.

For 22 years, I’ve been trying to convince Trasie to live into this custom!

Think of all the benefits:

- All the after Christmas deals;
- Not competing with all the traffic;
- To have more time to get presents;
- To not feel so rushed during Christmas; and,
- As mentioned it’s biblical: In the Bible we see that gifts are given on Epiphany.
- That’s when wise men brought gifts--

So, again, from the pulpit I make my plea, can’t we please exchange gifts on epiphany, celebrated Jan 6, instead of December 25? Please? Pretty please?

On this Second Sunday after Christmas which falls oh so close to Epiphany, Jan 6, we lean into the story of the sages.

What I propose is we consider how this story recorded in Matthew serves as a metaphor for our own spiritual journeys. Our longings. Our potential approaches toward others and toward God.

Matthew tells us, God has intervened, and the word has gotten out that a Child of promise has been born.

Without getting bogged down with how many were part of this caravan, where it came from, what the nature of the gifts are, instead let’s compare the reaction of this group of traveling Magi with that of King Herod to the birth of Jesus .

What was the reaction of King Herod when he learns of Christ's birth? The scripture says he is "troubled." He is filled with fear and anxiety. But holding his cards, he lies. He tells the travelers, he too wants to seek him, to pay him homage. To bow down, but the wise men know that the one in power will bow to no one. Herod is surrounded by influencers who support him in his desire to maintain his power, and subjects who, when he issues an act of violence, willingly do his bidding.

Considering our spiritual journeys, how does Herod represent our own desire for power and control? Or, our own reluctance to pay homage. Our unwillingness to follow the one who would teach the way of humility and peace?

How does Herod represent our reactions to that which or those who seem threatening? Herod reacts violently out of fear. What happens when fear grips us? How do we respond? Who are influencers in our lives?

So, this is one approach to the birth of Jesus. The herodian approach if you will.

The second spiritual approach to the Christ child is that represented by the surprising visitors from the East. These guided by the night sky are the ones we call wise.

The clearest most brilliant sky I have been under was at the Presbyterian Camp and Conference Center called, Ghost Ranch in Abiqui, NM. The night sky - Oh it is remarkable.

Astrologers synonymous with wise men. Sages because they look to the sky and are guided to this cosmic event that has taken place in Bethlehem.

But the guidance of the stars can only get them so far. They must stop and ask for directions. Wait, what? men, asking for directions...and they are called wise! My life is forever changed!

And, when they come to meet Him, they have peace in their hearts, a desire to worship, and there is joy in the encounter.

Might these represent a path for our spiritual journeys as well. That of longing to be in the presence of God, and openness to discovery of God in our midst.

Later, in the gospel of Mathew, this same Christ whom the Magi sought teaches, Search, and you will find.

In his most recent book entitled, *The Great Search*, John Philip Newell suggests "we are living through a time of immense transition as old systems of authority and belief are questioned. A new vision of reality is trying to be born. Earth and humanity need healing. The way we have lived on the planet is unsustainable. And the way our societies are plagued with racism, injustice, and violence is wrong. We need change."

Newell goes on to lift up eight wise people in his book as models for change that we might consider emulating. I would welcome anyone to engage this book in a type of study over the course of this year 2025 with me. Let me know.

Not in his book is someone whose life has been highlighted in recent days is Georgia's own Jimmy Carter who died at the age of 100--who grew up running around barefoot on a farm and would eventually occupy the White House. I have been moved by all that has been said and remembered about him, but perhaps most so by how his faith influenced his approach to others, and how he was led to offer his gifts to the world as an act of faith.

He is quoted as saying, "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something. I'm free to choose that something. That something--the something that I've chosen--is my faith. My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have, to try to make a difference."

In an interview, his friend Andrew Young spoke of Carter campaigning--how when they went to restaurants, he got up from the table to greet the kitchen staff, the often unseen workers to thank them.

And when elected to office, instead of riding in the motorcade down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House at inauguration, he and his wife Rosalyn get out of the car and walk the last mile and a half waving and being among the people--this while the assassinations of both Robert and John Kennedy were still fresh on people's minds.

When interviewed by Habitat for Humanity, Carter said: "I have learned that our greatest blessings come when we are able to improve the lives of others, and this is especially true when those others are desperately poor or in need." *From [an interview](#) with Habitat for Humanity*

The gospel writer Matthew, who began the telling of Jesus's story with the journey of the Magi searching for Jesus, concludes his gospel saying we disciples too may seek after and find Christ on a daily basis.

We meet Christ in the stranger, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

In the person who is hungry and thirsty--you gave me something to eat and drink;

In the prisoner and in the sick.

In the homeless person--

In the child....

As we begin a new year, and perhaps a number of resolutions, desires and intentions, let's consider the approaches of these biblical characters--Herod and the Magi-- to the birth of the Christ child.

There is a response of fear and anxiety and a desire to maintain power and control; and there is a desire to bow, to bless, and to offer gifts.

Tomorrow is King's Day! There will be celebrations, at least in Latin America there will be.

How might tomorrow be an opportunity to pay homage to the Christ-child, and to offer your gifts?

Tomorrow, and the next day, and every day we are given the gift of life.

“so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Amen