

Epiphany Sunday
January 5, 2020
Church of the Holy Cross
Ms. Mary Hinkle

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

The Gifts We Bear

“Ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts.”

I want to begin this morning with some explication, because I think the familiarity of the story in today’s Gospel reading can, paradoxically, become a barrier to our really hearing and understanding it. Maybe you all manage to escape this trap, but I know that I fall into it all too easily: “Oh yeah, Magi, star, gifts, yada yada yada, right. Got it. I remember.” But this story that we all think we know is a rich passage that bears a closer examination, even if we find in the end that we’re just reminding ourselves of things we learned about it long ago. And I hope that this digging a little deeper at the outset may make it easier to see how this story connects to our lives today.

So, to start, this story appears only in Matthew’s Gospel; the other Gospel authors don’t mention anything about it. One reason for this probably relates to Matthew’s audience; writing primarily for Jews, he frequently makes explicit or oblique references to the Hebrew Scriptures. In this case, the visit of the Magi reflects prophecies in Isaiah—in the passage we just heard and elsewhere (e.g. 42:6 and 49:6)—that “nations...and kings” will be drawn to the light of the Messiah. The meaning that is explicit in the prophet—that the Messiah will be for all people—is therefore implied in Matthew’s account of the visit of the wise men, Gentile astrologers—the scientists of their day—who did not worship the God of the Hebrews but clearly knew of the prophesied Messiah and traveled a great distance to honor him. (Magi, incidentally, is the plural form of the Latin word magus, which means a magician or one with special knowledge and, in a more specialized sense, refers to a hereditary priest of Zoroastrianism, the pre-Islamic religion of the Persians. With that dynastic connotation and Isaiah’s references to kings, it’s easy to see how Christmas carols and popular retellings of the story conflate the identity of kings and wise men.)

Our passage from Isaiah is also linked to the story of the Magi by the imagery of light; the prophet speaks of outsiders being drawn to the Messiah’s light, and the wise men follow a star that their lore and astronomical insight tell them is associated with the birth of the long-awaited Jewish king.

And a third point of connection between these two passages is their references to gifts of gold and frankincense. In the symbology of the Biblical era, gold was a gift offered to kings in acknowledgement of their royal status and ruling power. So the Magi recognize Jesus, a baby in

a cradle, as the King of Israel. Frankincense was burned in religious rites by the Hebrews and by other worshipping communities. So, with this gift, the Magi acknowledge the divinity of Jesus, the Son of God. Matthew's story adds myrrh, an element not mentioned by Isaiah, a tree resin that was part of the incense mixture used in the Jewish temple—but also an item used in preparing bodies for burial. For Matthew's audience members, who are learning about Jesus, this reference subtly foreshadows his death and burial—and thus his resurrection. In this story, barely more than an anecdote, told in 11 verses, Matthew lays out the arc of Jesus' life, identifies his nature as both human and divine, and foresees his self-sacrificial death for the sake of all people.

See, I told you this was a rich passage. We can imagine how it might have acted on Matthew's audience—almost certainly hearing it read aloud—with its links to the prophet Isaiah, its rich imagery, its suspenseful narrative. What will the Magi do once they have found the child? Will they fall for Herod's ploy? What a relief to hear that God warned them in a dream to avoid returning to Herod.

But what does this story mean for us? How can we connect to this encounter that took place more than 2,000 years ago? The most obvious answer, as we celebrate Epiphany, is to imagine ourselves in the place of the wise men, coming to Jesus and falling to our knees in awed worship. But what gifts do we bring? Since this is an act of imagination on our part, we can't give him physical gifts, even if we had ready supplies of frankincense and myrrh. Christina Rossetti, in her poem that we know mainly from its setting as a Christmas hymn, "In the Bleak Midwinter," says that she will give her heart.

Okay, that's all well and good, but it leaves me with the same question. What does that mean? How do we give our hearts to Jesus? As we enter a new calendar year, our culture tells us that it's time to be practical, to get active, to DO SOMETHING. So what do we DO?

One place to start is to consider what Jesus told his disciples to do: love one another. Love neighbors. Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the ill. We try to do those things as a parish, and all these efforts can use our help. All you have to do is read the bulletin announcements and the weekly e-mail to see a list of opportunities to show your love for Jesus.

Another way to think about gifts to offer Jesus is to start with the basic proposition that all we are and all we have are gifts from God, and worship is returning those gifts as our offering. Take some time for reflection and self-inventory; what talents has God blessed you with, and how can you offer them back? Are you skilled at making things that are beautiful? Consider joining the Flower Guild, whose members create beautiful offerings of flowers each week. Do you have a gift for orderliness? Think about the Altar Guild, a monthly commitment to help make God's altar ready for our corporate worship. Are you extroverted, good at meeting new people? Greet newcomers and visitors on Sunday. You can help the Finance Committee build the budget, bake for coffee hour or receptions, deliver food to shelters, drive parishioners to evening events, dig in the garden, make repairs to God's house, sing, read aloud. I'll bet that any of us can take any talent God has given us and find a way to use it for God's glory.

A final thought: For many people—maybe for you—Advent and Christmas and the start of a new year are filled with pain and sorrow rather than peace and joy. We have seen loved ones die, have faced illness or hardship, have felt lonely or overwhelmed, have done all we can do and are spent. Maybe your first reaction to suggestions of practical ways to offer gifts to God is, "I can't even." If that's where you find yourself, then hold fast to the thought that the first thing the wise

men did was simply to follow a light... a light that led them to THE LIGHT. Bishop Susan Goff, in her Epiphany message this week, says that we can begin by simply paying attention to light, "because noticing physical light in the world and in your life is training you to see the light of Christ that shines in every darkness." And once we see that light, we can be that light, offering it back to God by reflecting it to others.

So let us walk with the Magi to a humble house in Bethlehem, where we will find the babe who is both King and Lord, the Light of the world. Amen.