

“A Meaningful Gift”  
Matthew 2:1-12

On the church calendar, today is identified as the Second Sunday of Christmas. That liturgical season lasts for 12 days and likely is the basis for the song that begins “On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me...” Just in case you feel as if you overspent in preparing for your holiday, the latest estimate for what the presents in that song would cost is a bit more than \$179,000. Hopefully, that gives some comfort as your credit card statement comes due!

The Biblical reading we just heard is often tied to our observance of Christmas, too. Its main characters were represented in the children’s pageant and DPC Dads drive-through-nativity here recently, but those events actually provide the Scriptural basis for the season of Epiphany that begins on Thursday. Epiphany recalls how the Good News of Jesus’ birth began to spread outside of Bethlehem and thus we read of the very first visitors from beyond the region.

Matthew called them wise men, travelers from the East who had followed a star to Jerusalem and began asking where they could find the child “born king of the Jews.” Their request reached King Herod who brought in the men, learned about the star, consulted the Jewish leadership to hear what their Scriptures said about where the Messiah was to be born and then sent the wise men on their way asking only that they let him know once they find the child. “So that I may also go and pay him homage,” he lied. Yet after presenting their gifts, the wise men having been warned in a dream not to see Herod again leave for home by another route.

There are many details about those visitors that evoke wonder and mystery. Where did they come from? What was the star that led them to Jerusalem, stopped, went before them to Bethlehem and stopped again? There is uncertainty about their profession, their names, and even how many wise men went. The hymn we will sing speaks of three kings from the Orient, but Matthew doesn’t tell us any of those things. What we do know is that they brought three gifts.

They were the first Christmas presents, thus launching a tradition that clearly lives on to this day. I wonder if Mary and Joseph began another practice of the season, too, and were the first to return or exchange a gift as gold, frankincense and myrrh weren’t very practical for a new household. Thus, I wouldn’t be surprised if those parents sold the presents for coins that could actually help them feed and take care of the baby. The Bible doesn’t tell us that either.

Yet what it does reveal is the response of those visitors from the East, for in offering the gifts Matthew says they “knelt down and paid him homage.” It was a deeply meaningful moment for them and their presents and their response to the child revealed his significance.

In our best moments, the gifts we offer or receive hold great meaning, too. To be sure, there are times when presents are given out of obligation or desperation. Some gifts are meant simply to be fun, too. Yet in their purest form, presents at Christmas and other times reveal love or affection, bless the recipient and acknowledge the important role they play in our life. In other words, when it all comes together, gifts are meaningful for the giver and the honoree.

It was that way at the first Christmas. The wise men were determined to find the newborn king and demonstrated that resolve by the miles they traveled, in asking for directions, by bowing down before the infant, and in acting on their dream’s warning. All of those responses resulted in their gifts. Yet the significance of those presents was deeper still.

Looking back, we can see that each of those presents represented something about the child and the unique role he would fill for humankind. Gold was an offering worthy of a king and that infant would become a sovereign unlike any other and reign forever. Frankincense was an aromatic resin burned in Temple offerings, pointing both to the role of Jesus as priest and

sacrifice and how he is worthy of our worship and adoration. Myrrh had a pleasing smell, too, and along with other uses, was part of the embalming process in that era, thus anticipating not only the life he would offer for you and me, but how that child would forever change the nature of death as well. There is no way the wise men could have known all that, yet even so they gave. In so doing, they demonstrate something else about the gifts we offer, too.

For in many instances, we don't know all that our presents will mean to the recipient either. Even if they express gratitude to us in the moment or write a thank-you note later, we may do not know all that it represents. Yet still in this season of Christmas and other times we give.

This past week, our daughter, her six-month old son, and I made a quick visit to North Carolina to see my mother. Mom now lives in a care facility in Davidson. Her memory and ability to express herself have both declined significantly since the onset of this pandemic and is now at the point where I suspect she did not know who the three visitors from Pennsylvania were. Even so, she was happy to see us and in good spirits. She didn't hesitate when we offered to take her off-site either, but with rare exception throughout our visit could only respond with one-word replies to questions. I had heard similar reports from my siblings on their most recent visits, but it was still sad to see that once vibrant woman and former high school English teacher struggle to communicate. It's a reality many of you have experienced with loved ones, too.

We took her to lunch at a favorite restaurant. Mom clearly enjoyed it and fussed over her great-grandson as she repeatedly said "That's a precious baby." Afterwards, we made the short drive back and got her settled into the community gathering room. I helped her move from wheelchair to couch and sat down to say goodbye. With my arm around her, I thanked her for being such a wonderful mother and the emotion showed in my eyes. She looked toward me with a puzzled expression and then placed her hand on my cheek. Did she know who I was or who she is to me? I'd like to think she did, but even if she did not, that gift will stay with me forever.

Yesterday, we started a new year and along with all the possibilities these twelve months will bring, I am convinced it will include divinely-orchestrated blessings. Some of them will come through tangible gifts that we give or receive, but far more often, it will occur in the unique human encounters that will bring meaning to the days and weeks ahead. To help us prepare for such moments, I'd like to pass on a tradition I just learned about this past week.

As you walked into the sanctuary, you may have noticed signs over the door that read 20 + C + M + B + 22. Those symbols are not a math equation, but rather an old church custom for Epiphany. The four numbers when joined together identify the new year. The plus signs symbolizes the cross and the letters CMB stand for the traditional names of the magi--Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar--which are not identified anywhere in Scripture, but became part of Christian lore around the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Others interpret the letters to recall the Latin phrase *Christus mansionem benedicat* which means *Christ bless this house*. Individuals will write those symbols above the doorway in chalk to seek a blessing over the home. I chose not to use chalk on the walls here, but at the end of this service, I will offer the benediction at the door to my right by including a prayer that comes from our *Book of Common Worship*.

I'd like to offer it now, too, and would say beforehand that should 2022 be anything close to what is sought here that it will be a succession of meaningful gifts. "God of doors and homes, bless this home this year and every year. Bless all who come and go through this door, both those who live here and those who visit. May all who enter this door come in peace and bring joy. May all who come to this door find welcome and love. May the love and joy in this home overflow and spread into the community and the world. And may Jesus the Christ watch over us all." (*Book of Common Worship*: Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p. 210)