

## “Returning the Christmas Gifts”

Well, Christmas is over. The stockings are empty. The eggnog has been finished up. Size 12's have been exchanged for size 14's and soon the decorations will be boxed up for another year. And if your house is like mine, it seems that some of the chaos is returning to normal. But I'm not sure what that thought process says about us, or at least about me. Because while Advent is the season of expectation, of waiting, sometimes once Christmas arrives I am just too eager to put back in the boxes until next year. How about you? Do you feel some relief when the holidays are over? And if so, what about Jesus? What do we do with the babe? Do we box him up too? Well, hopefully not.

In an effort to hold on to Jesus even if I put away our manger scene, I began thinking about the candles that we light on the Advent wreath each Sunday. Each candle is associated with a word that I also tried to tie into the sermon that day. Just so you won't have to try to recall them on your own the words are hope, peace, joy, love. And in a way, these are the real Christmas gifts to us from God.

So even though Christmas is over, let's consider what our new year will look if we are careful not to box these gifts up. Because these are really the essential tenants of our Christian faith. Rather than returning them to the department store of grace that God, let's consider that they are the gifts from God that last all year long.

One way to do that is to read the story of the gifts that the three kings brought to Jesus in Matthew's version of the nativity. However, we don't really know much about these wise men –

who they were or where they came from. We do know that they were curious about the birth of a new king and came prepared to honor him with gifts.

Only Matthew tells us about the visit of the Magi and only HIS birth account is so focused kings. We are introduced to King Herod, are told that the baby is the “king of the Jews” and read about Jesus being visited by these three kings from the east. Actually the Bible calls them wise men, and never mentions any number, but they have manifested themselves in the form of three kings in our modern day nativity scenes. The truth is that they were probably astrologers from Persia or Syria.

Why is it that Matthew’s account is so filled with royalty? Was it just to give us another Christmas carol? Well, if you believe that each gospel was written for a specific purpose and to a specific audience, you know that Matthew wrote his gospel directly to the Jews. He was trying to convince the Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Messianic promise – therefore, he was the king that they had waited for. And it is only fitting that Kings would come to visit a king.

Whoever these visitors were, Matthew lets us know in several ways that these men knew and understood who Jesus was even before they saw him. They were the first ones to ask King Herod where they could find the King of the Jews so somehow or another his status had been made known to them. They recognized him for the royalty that he was.

Also, we know that the wise men brought gifts but WHAT they brought is very significant. First, they brought him gold. Now this was a gift given to royalty to recognize their kingly status so gold would have been expected. However, they also brought him frankincense. Frankincense was a gift that was traditionally given only to priests. In those days, a good Jew believed that he had to go through a priest in order to approach God. We know today that we

consider Jesus our priest. That is why we always end our prayers in his name. He is the only intercessor or mediator that we need. He goes directly to God on our behalf.

Priests were also responsible for handling the sacrifices so they would be properly performed. And you have heard me say before that, when Jesus entered Heaven after his death on the cross, God must have said, “Finally – a sacrifice that is acceptable.” Therefore, we do not have to make sacrifices because Jesus paid the ULTIMATE sacrifice for each one of us. So the role of priest is no longer needed. Is it possible that the Magi were foreshadowing the part that Christ would play in our lives?

Lastly, the kings brought him myrrh. Myrrh was a gift that was given to someone who was about to die. Now certainly, everyone is going to die eventually, but it would be strange to take myrrh to a newborn babe. Yet, we read in Mark’s gospel that Jesus was offered a mixture of wine and myrrh on the cross and in John’s gospel that Joseph of Arimathea brought myrrh to anoint his dead body with before his burial. Again, were the magi simply astrologers or were they prophets as well? It is clear by the gifts that they bore that this was no ordinary baby and that they understood why he had come to the earth.

I was having breakfast with a group of clergy women, and we were talking about preaching on the Kings after Christmas. a friend of mine who is a Lutheran pastor shared a story with us about a family whose children decided to present the nativity in the form of a play on Christmas Day. The problem was that there were only five cousins in the group, so they had to improvise a little.

There was only one girl, so she of course, played the part of Mary. The older cousin quickly claimed Joseph to emphasize his authority. The three year old who really didn’t talk

much could be a shepherd because the shepherds don't have to say anything. That left the five year old twins.

So they decided that one twin could represent ALL the angels and the other would be the collective wise men. He then, only had to step forward and say, "I bring you gifts from the East – gold, frankincense and myrrh." However, when the time came for his line, he said very confidently, "I bring you gifts from the east – gold, circumstance and mud."

And the more I thought about it, the more prophetic that seemed. All year long, God gives us hope, peace, joy and love and we respond to these gifts from our King by bringing God gold, circumstance and mud. Here's what I mean.

On our best days, we bring God our gold. A few years ago, I led a retreat for the older Adults in Foothills Presbytery. At sometime during the two days together, I quoted from Psalm 118, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." And one of the ladies there showed us some motions that she knew that went with the Psalm and told us that she begins her day EVERY MORNING by standing and saying that verse. She said that it kept her focused all day on God.

Well, that sounded like a great idea to me. Not being much into liturgical dance, however, I decided that the first thing every morning, as soon as I opened my eyes, I would say, "This is the day that the Lord has made, let me rejoice and be glad in it." In other words, I would give God my gold. My first thoughts, before they became clouded with earthly things, would be directed to God, about God, and centered in God. I would bring God my gold.

So every morning I awoke with God's blessings on my mind. Thanking God for all that had been given to me, all that had been accomplished through him the previous day. I asked for God's direction so that we would start out the day together.

And I did this – for about four days! Then one morning, circumstance entered the picture. I don't remember the EXACT circumstance but take your pick! Trouble at work, harsh words with my husband, too much to do and not enough time. Or not enough to do and too much time. Worries about children, grandchildren, money, the stock market, world peace, how long there will be construction on I85! You see, I can ALWAYS find something to worry about if I focus on circumstances, which I so often do.

The Psalmist has a much better idea. In the words we heard earlier David begins with gold – “I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart, before the gods I sing your praises.” However, when circumstance clouded his ways, he still focused on the gold. Listen to his words again. “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies.”

You see, while David was being pursued in the wilderness by the armies of his foes, he still trusted in the LORD and focused on the gold that God offers. How often do we let our circumstances crowd out the blessings that we are given each day and lose sight of the manger altogether?

But some days are even worse! Some days our circumstances turn completely to mud! Sometimes the test comes back positive or the transmission breaks or the marriage crumbles or the coach says, “I'm putting you on the bench until you shape up!” Because we all know that sometimes life is just muddy. And that is truly ALL we have to give to God.

But remember I said that the child's words in the Christmas play were prophetic? You see friends I think that the little five year old actually had it right. Because not just at Christmas, but all year long, God gives us hope, peace, joy and love. These are NOT just the gifts of Christmas but the gifts of God's grace through the baby Jesus for our lifetime.

God gives us the hope of his presence through the child who he instructed Joseph to name Emmanuel, “God with us”. God gives us the peace that passes all understanding when we are assured that the child grew to be a man and experience all of life for and with us so that God could truly know how we feel.

God gives us joy in knowing that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Because God’s majesty is so great that God created the cosmos and everything in it yet he knows us so personally that the Scripture tells us that God calls us each by name. God gives us the love that would sacrifice his only son on a cross so that we could hold on to the hope of Eternal life with God and all those we love who have gone before us.

And what kind of gifts does God expect us to return to him? God wants our gold – yes. Our very best. Our adoration, our praise, our tithes, our talents used to glorify Him. But because God is a God of grace, God REALLY wants our circumstance and our mud. The good, the bad and the ugly.

And that is the complete story of Christmas. God sent Jesus as a gift to remind us of all of the gold in our lives. The hope of something more than what we can see today. The peace of the manger which really can be ours, through prayer, all year long. The joy of knowing that we are God’s own. And the love that gives us Eternal life.

But all of these gifts are still collectively the gift of grace. Because even before the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, God knew that we would bring him gold, circumstance and mud in return. And he sent his son any way. And that, my friends, is the real gift of Christmas and the only one that cannot be exchanged! Thanks be to God. Amen.

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