

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
The Feast Day of Epiphany Year C  
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We've seen them everywhere over the holidays: three regal men, sometimes depicted with camels, bearing gifts that they have traveled hundreds of miles to offer to Jesus. Although their story, which appears in the Gospel of Matthew, is distinct from the nativity story in Luke's Gospel, and although it's likely that they didn't reach Mary, Joseph, and Jesus until Jesus was a couple of years old, these wise travelers are almost always depicted along with the shepherds and others who inhabit the story of the birth of Christ. Christmas cards and nativity sets vividly bring together the stories that Matthew and Luke offer.

We have these really familiar images of these wise men who come to welcome the Christ and lavish him with gifts, but the truth is that Matthew's Gospel tells us very little about them. Matthew refers to them as "magi," a word that means wise men or astrologers. We're not certain where they came from; possibly Persia, about a thousand miles away, where there was a class of priestly folk who were referred to as magi. We're not sure how many of them there were. Because they offered three gifts, tradition has often assumed there were three wise men, but estimates across the centuries have ranged from two to twelve. We don't even know their names, though legend has called them Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

The wise men are sometimes referred to as the three kings, a designation that comes not from Matthew's Gospel but from passages in the Hebrew scriptures that refer to kings who come bearing gifts for a great new ruler.

All this is to say that the magi are shrouded in mystery. Despite the relative lack of information in Matthew's gospel, we do know this much: they possessed the ability to read the heavens, they felt compelled to follow a star, they traveled a vast distance to welcome and pay homage to Jesus, and they brought him amazing presents.

I'm intrigued by the fact that Matthew, who is so fuzzy on certain details regarding the magi, is very specific about the gifts they brought. This suggests that the gifts are part of Matthew's whole narrative of Jesus' birth. Those who would have first heard Matthew's story would have understood the significance of the wise men's offerings, but, as we ponder the story two millennia later, it's good to remind ourselves of what these gifts would have meant.

In Jesus' day, the first gift, gold, had much the same meaning as it does to many of us. It's precious. It's lavish. It's a gift fit for a king. Both Isaiah and the Psalms refer to kings who bring gold to honor a great ruler. For the wise men, the gift of gold was a way of acknowledging Jesus as a king.

It is, perhaps, a little harder for us to grasp the value of frankincense and myrrh. Both frankincense and myrrh come from the aromatic resin of trees. In simpler terms, they are dried tree sap. And we may wonder what kind of gift that is for a child! But in Jesus' time, they were costly, especially myrrh.

Frankincense was typically used in religious rituals. In Exodus 30, God tells Moses to make an incense that includes frankincense, for use in the tent of meeting, where God meets with the priests. God tells Moses, "It shall be for you most holy." The wise men's gift of frankincense

symbolizes that God has come in the person of Christ, that Christ himself has become the place of meeting between divinity and humanity.

Myrrh seems like perhaps the strangest gift of all. In Jesus' time, it was particularly associated with funerals and was used in the process of preparing a body for burial. In the New Testament, the only mentions of myrrh, besides today's reading, are in the gospels of Mark and John, in connection with Jesus' crucifixion and death. This seems a curious gift for a young child, and I have to wonder if this gift haunted Jesus' parents a bit. Maybe Mary already knew this truth, through Simeon's proclamation that a sword would pierce her heart. Though it carries some foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus, I think the magi intended it not as a morbid gift but rather as a reminder to Jesus that, even for him, earthly life is brief, and we are called to use it well.

On one hand, the gifts show that the wise men knew who the child was, humanity and divinity embodied together in a life of sacrificial love. Their choice of gifts reveals their discernment of Jesus' inner identity, beyond just that of a toddler in Bethlehem. They understood the mission of that child, who was to be the Messiah, not just to Jewish population, but to the Gentiles or pagans as the wise men themselves were. In offering these gifts, they paid homage to the truth of Jesus' inner identity. They saw him, knelt before him in adoration and love, and heaped upon him their treasures and themselves.

On the other hand, the gifts they offered also tell us something about the wise men themselves, and perhaps, about us also. For in their humble stance before the Christ child, which we assume when we kneel at the rail, in their radical opening of their treasure chests and hearts, in their precious gifts, in our radical opening of our treasure to the mission of Christ, we could understand the gold to represent the lavish offering of the best of themselves, their highest virtues of honesty, commitment, compassion, and love. Like gold, all of those virtues are precious and are to be valued. They bowed on their knees, stretched out their hands, and offered the best of themselves, to the mission of God through Jesus. This too is what we do when we kneel at the altar. We offer the best of ourselves to the mission of God, through the body of Christ we are about to receive and become. The best of ourselves can be our commitment to God's mission here at our parish, our compassion for others, our love for our neighbors, and all the gifts so freely given to us by God, that we are able to offer back to God's service. The best of ourselves can also be our places of deepest vulnerability, of brokenness, of disconnection, allowing God to heal us so that we can heal God's world. I think one of the best examples of how this sense of offering the best of ourselves is in the words we profess to do in our Rite 1 Eucharistic Prayer, "We offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls, and bodies"—a complete offering of ourselves to the revelation of God made present to us in the Eucharist.

The frankincense, the incense used to symbolize the rising of our hearts and prayers to God, could be telling this Christ child that these wise men were people of prayer. They may not have had a common language, but through their longing hearts and the bringing of these symbolic gifts, they would have communicated at depth. The wise men come to find Jesus in unconventional ways, not through established religion, not through the keeping of the Torah, not through the regular channels of sacrifice and purity, but through turning their hearts, moving their feet, following a star as they seek the truth that has changed the path of our world. They were the spiritual seekers of their age, as so many of us are spiritual seekers today. Their gift of frankincense tells us that we can find our pathway to the manger, or nowadays to the altar, to the presence of God, in all different ways, as long as we are people of prayer. The gift we can offer at the altar rail today can be our longing to find the truth of Christ in our lives, our spiritual hunger, our doubts, our concerns, or the epiphanies we find in our own lives when we move beyond reason to intuition.

Saint Augustine made the famous claim “that our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee ... O Lord.” This is what we offer forward as our gift to God, this is our frankincense, our restless souls which long to find reunion with our creator, the author of our lives and the lover of our souls.

The myrrh, the ointment which anoints bodies for burial, certainly foreshadowed Jesus’ death, but also speaks to us about the wise men’s willingness to sacrifice themselves for Jesus. They were willing to trek 1000 miles to find the miracle that happened on earth which was projected into the heavens; they were willing to lay all of their possessions at the feet of Jesus; they didn’t hold back, they didn’t count the costs, they gave their all. This sacrificial giving is often the hardest part for us in our present culture. We so often give to God or to our parish ministries what’s left-over, the non-essentials in our lives or in our budgets, what we calculate we can do without, rather than giving sacrificially upfront and with joy, for the good of the Kingdom. This seems to be human nature, to worry about ourselves first, but it is a spiritual obstacle to union with God. For when we sacrificially give, when we give not until it hurts, but until it feels good, we are drawn closer to God, and the Spirit moves deep within, and we willingly and joyfully share our blessings as the wise men did, in the form of our gifts and resources, all of which have been given to us by God. In that utter release of all that we have and all that we are to God, we join hands with each other and put our hands, our lives, our selves, bodies, and souls into the hand of God, so that God can use us in God’s mission for the world. This is what is asked of us and I invite you to prayerfully consider what our parish would look like if we were all to do this, to make a commitment to consistently share our many gifts, skills, and blessings for the mission of God revealed and manifested here among us.

The gifts of the wise men showed Jesus that they knew who he was, the embodiment of the union of heaven and earth, the revelation of God’s mission rooted in sacrificial love – and their gifts allowed Jesus to see who they were, people who would offer the best of themselves, people of prayer, people will to sacrifice for the mission of God. It is my prayer that the gifts we offer Jesus through the support of our common life and our parish ministries show Jesus the best of who we are, show Jesus we are rooted in prayer, and show Jesus we will sacrifice for the mission of God.

I pray for this not just so we will have a balanced budget, although I do want that, but mainly so the joy of the wise men would be ours too. In our gift-giving to the holy, the invisible, the inner reality of Jesus becomes visible, within us and our community. In our gift-giving to the holy, we strengthen the relationship with the giver of all gifts, God. The wise men came to find Jesus, in response to the loving action of God, and each time we enter into that space of generous giving, we find a joy beyond our imagination.

The art of receiving God’s revelation with joy and self-giving rather than resistance is the work of our lives and is only possible through God’s grace and power.

Each week, we take a similar pilgrimage as the wise men, following the light of Christ present here at St. Andrew’s, the light that floods through our altar window, the light that illumines the altar itself with the life-giving force of Jesus, the light, the spark of energy in our conversations, in our dreams, in our gatherings, in our exploration, the light that is deep within us that is the portal to our reunion with God.

On this day of Epiphany, as we set off into the new year, I want to invite us, the body of Christ, to think of the wise men’s gifts to Jesus and the gifts we offer him as well, that we can lavishly open ourselves to Christ’s presence at the altar rail, in a meeting, or in our private prayer. May we respond to the manifestation of Christ here among us with the joy and anticipation felt in the

hearts of the magi, who knelt at the Christ's child's feet and offered themselves, their souls, and their bodies to the glory of God made manifest in Christ. Amen.