

“The Gifts of the Magi”  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 3, 2016, Epiphany Sunday  
W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

It was a startling occasion for those wise men. Those Magi those sages of old when they saw a star rising that they didn't recognize. Did it rise straight to the heights of the heavens? We really do not know. I talked to one professor back in February at Princeton Seminary and he told me he thought the star was only about 200 feet off the ground. Just right there in front of them. A God thing. An epiphany right in front of their eyes. Something that they couldn't miss. Whether he's right or wrong I do not know. It was a new thought thinking it would be a lot easier to follow a star that was right there in front of your eyes or the one that was way up there in the heavens and you're wondering how on earth they could figure out where that star was leading them. One right here would be easier to follow.

An epiphany. That's what we call it. Epiphany Sunday. An Epiphany day on Wednesday. I hope you have a good Epiphany Wednesday. It means the coming of the Wise Men. The Eastern Orthodox Church declares that day as Christmas. Now think about having to wait all the way until January 6 to have Christmas instead of December 25. I like our way better. Don't you? But there it is the light still shining to remind us that Epiphany is still on the horizon just a few days away.

The coming of the Wise Men. Matthew was the official chronicler for that story. If it wasn't for Matthew we wouldn't know anything about the Wise Men coming at all. And that would be a shame.

Luke tells us about the shepherds. If it wasn't for Luke we wouldn't know anything about the shepherds in the story. Mark starts right off with the baptism of Jesus and John starts with those mystical words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” And a man named John comes right in with the Baptist story.

But Matthew tells us about the Wise Men, the Magi, the astrologers, whatever you want to call them. People who came a couple of hundred miles or 400 miles or 800 miles away coming across the desert following some thing some light that they believed was going to lead them to some thing magnificent. Lead them to the King of the Jews.

That's what they said when they showed up in Jerusalem. After all when they got to Jerusalem they thought they would find the new born King in the palace. Isn't that where you find Kings and Queens and Princesses? You find them in the palace. At least you did in those days.

And so they show up at the palace looking for the new born King. “Where is he, they wanted to know? We saw his star at its rising and we’ve been travelling ever since. We have come to pay him homage. Where is the new born King of the Jews?” And it troubled everyone. Frightened is what it says in the New Revised Standard Version. Troubled is what it said in the King James. Whatever it was it was a startling event to have these people these Wise Men show up and wanting to know where the new King was.

It got Herod’s attention. Herod was not a Jew but he was a wantabe Jew. He had always wanted to be a Jew. And now someone else was born to be King over his people his adopted people? Where was that King supposed to be born he wanted to know. So he sent for his priests and scribes and he gave a little prize I’m sure for the one who came up with the answer first. In Bethlehem. In the land of Judea but we’re already in Judea and Bethlehem is just 7 miles away down the road. That’s an easy place to find.

If the Magi don’t get lost if the Magi don’t take the wrong trail out of town and end up at the Dead Sea, they will be in Bethlehem in a few hours. They leave Herod with his words echoing in their ears, “come back and tell me what you have found so that I too may come and worship him.”

You wonder if Herod had a good laugh after they left ... silly men following a star! Maybe Herod had other official business to tend to because there is no record that he sent spies trailing them. Why would he trust these strangers to come back with a report, wouldn’t it have been easier to just follow them the few miles down to Bethlehem?

Maybe the first unofficial gift these Magi brought to the child and his parents was the gift of not raising a lot of suspicion around Jerusalem. No one seems to notice as they head out of town to the southeast following the star.

They, the Magi, also brought real gifts with them. Yes, gifts for the new born king, but what strange gifts they brought for a baby—gold, frankincense and myrrh.

You could ask the question, “What were they thinking?” These Magi were supposed to be learned men who knew about things, so why didn’t they know what gifts to bring a baby? Well, maybe they were trying to impress his family. After all they were expecting the baby to be born to royalty. Didn’t they first show up at the palace in Jerusalem, thinking that the child would be born to someone in the royal family? A royal child surely gifts of gold and precious perfumes would be something that a royal family would appreciate.

Isaiah had foretold a day when strangers would come and worship in Israel, handing over their wealth in homage to the true God. “...the wealth of the nations shall come to you ... they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” (Isaiah 60:5-6)

Some modern day scholars have tried to theorize that the gifts were symbolic foreshadowing what the life of this baby would be like. Gold is a gift for a king, and Jesus would be called king. Yet frankincense and myrrh were used in embalming the dead. Thus these two gifts foreshadowed the dark end that this baby would one day meet on the cross.

The practical side of me wants to shout what useless gifts these were to give to a baby. Yes, useless. Here we have a poor baby, born to a poor, peasant family, soon to be on the run as refugees into Egypt, who is presented with a lump of gold and a couple bottles of perfume!

A more practical gesture would have been food, clothing, tickets out of Bethlehem before Herod finds them or diapers!

And yet, I see their problem. What do you give the king of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Savior of the world? “What can I give him, poor as I am?” Isn’t that what the popular Christmas carol asks? “If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;” A lamb? At least that is useful, though perhaps somewhat impractical to carry off to Egypt by a family on the run.

But what do you give Jesus? When the Lord of Life reaches down from heaven and touches the earth; condescends in love to come to us in the flesh, as one of us, a baby; come to do battle with Herod and all the kingdoms of this world; to set us free from sin and death what do you give? What can you give? The carol ends, “If I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what can I give him: Give my heart.”

What do we give? Maybe that is the point of the story. We, like the Magi, gather before the manger, before the incarnation of God’s awesome love, fall to our knees and fumble in our purse for a gift worthy of what God has given us. What have we got to give? God’s gift to us is just too great, too wondrous for us to find a gift worthy of return. So all we can do is, like the Magi, thrust forward our pointless presents, a bag of gold, a bottle of perfume, scented Soap-on-a-Rope.

In that moment when the Magi fell on their knees before the baby Jesus—opened their boxes and emptied them, giving over everything they had, even if what they had was not exactly what was needed—this is the heart of it all.

Aren’t the best gifts our exuberant response to some good thing that has happened to us? We give because to us something has been given. Such giving is not a means toward something else. It just is. It is the overflowing response; an overabundance of joy that is caused by God’s overflowing love toward us.

I have been a fan of the late Fred Rogers most of my life. Maybe because back in the 1970’s we were on a first name basis for a couple of days ... and then 5 years later when I called him on the phone I started to say who I was and he interrupted me by saying, “Glenn, I remember you what’s on your mind today?” During that conversation he told me how he had taken a book to a mutual friend of ours who was going to have surgery soon. He said it was a book of short sayings that meant a lot to him and he wanted her to have it. He said, “When I gave it to her she started to cry and she looked at me and said, ‘I’m just so touched by this gift. I really thank you for it.’” Well, she brightened his life! The way that person received his little book was a gift to him. And he said, “Ever since she has helped me to think about the gift of receiving. You know, that’s the only gift we have to give to God: receiving gracefully what God has given to us.”

We are here this morning, even if we do not know it, in response to what God has given us. We are here because of something we have seen, because of something we have heard. You have been evoked, called forth, like the Magi, led by the star to some great gift not of your own creation. You have heard your name called, felt the tug of God's grace upon your life and so here you are, offering yourself and your silly, pointless wonderful gifts to God.

Before the manger you lay your songs of praise, your prayers, your 2 hours a month of volunteer work at our Daily Bread, or the 8 hours when you were an overnight host for Interfaith Hospitality Network, or that weekly visit to someone who is old, sick and lonely.

The good news is told to us by the Magi. God receives your gifts. He'll gladly take your pointless, wonderful, overflowing gifts, your response to his gift—himself.