

## Epiphany ~ January 4, 2009

### *The Fourth Gift\**

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#### **Isaiah 60: 1 – 6**

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup>For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but God will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you. <sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. <sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. <sup>6</sup>A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midean (Mid-e-in) and Ephah (F-ah); all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim God's praise.

#### **Matthew 2:1 - 12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>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 the child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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One gift that the Magi brought to Christ exceeded all others in value.

One gift. One gift alone.

Was it the gold? Money is always needed. And since, according to Matthew, Jesus has "no place to lay his head" a bit of a discretionary fund will be helpful to this itinerant teacher. Or maybe a gift of gold would be good for Mary and Joseph because they could "bank it" for Jesus' college education.

Gold! Surely this is a gift fit for a king. Especially in today's market, this precious metal is a treasured commodity. I asked our New Hampshire banker friend, Jim Tibbetts, when we visited with him over New Years, to get me some current statistics on gold. It turns out that an ounce of gold reached a high of \$1,030 in 2008 and is predicted to be valued in 2009 for as much as \$1500. an ounce. Currently an American Gold Eagle bullion cube goes for between \$924. and \$954. Not bad in today's market.

And yet, in the words of one Biblical commentator, "how much value can gold represent to me who rhapsodizes that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as splendidly as a single lily in the field?"

Well, if the prize gift was not gold, perhaps it was frankincense? What gift could be more appropriate to help mask the odors of the animals in the barn? Surely this fragrantly burning incense would create the illusion of a welcome worthy of the one whose birth is being celebrated?

But how practical is it for Mary and Joseph in the throes of child birth and exile to Egypt to have the time to grind up these white chunks and beads of resin into a powder in order to burn the balsam-smelling frankincense?

If the symbolic significance of the gift was considered, it might make its presentation more valuable. For frankincense was one of the "bag" of elements that the magi used in their secret incantations. After all, the word "magi" is where we get our word "magician." These magi undoubtedly dabbled in the esoteric arts of magic and alchemy. By handing over this frankincense, they were symbolically handing over the tricks of their trade. They were demonstrating that they were no longer pagan dabblers in black magic, but were now bowing before the true God. Had not Isaiah foretold of a day when even the Gentiles would come and worship in Israel, handing over their wealth 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 God." (Isaiah 60:6)

Frankincense. A symbolic gift? Yes! But the best gift? I think not.

So if not gold or frankincense, then the number one gift must be the myrrh? After all, giving such costly ointment for the body shows an understanding of who this child really is, for this infant will indeed mature and grow into manhood and ultimately die for the sins of the world. Myrrh is one of a number of oils and spices used in the burial ritual to anoint the body. Last week we heard Simeon tell Mary that a "sword would pierce her soul," surely a foreshadowing of her son's death. Later, the woman at Bethany poured costly ointment, costly perfume, costly myrrh over Jesus. She was chastised by Judas for her extravagance but praised by Jesus who accepts her gift as one of extravagant love and blessing.

Thus, the magi's gift of myrrh reminds us that this is a birth that will bring us face to face with death, with its fear and pain but also with its ultimate resurrection victory. And yet that death is years in the offing when the magi arrive to celebrate birth. So perhaps even myrrh isn't greatest of the gifts.

If the one gift of greatest value is not the gold, not the frankincense, not the myrrh, then what is it?

It is the fourth gift which the magi brought.

If we search diligently, we find that the fourth gift is there in the text. Matthew mentions it three times which is three times more than he mentions gold, frankincense and myrrh so it must matter more to him: it must matter most: it must be more central to the story and to his understanding of the gospel.

And indeed it is. The fourth gift is “to pay homage” to Christ. To kneel, to worship, to adore, to give one’s whole being to Christ.

The phrase first appears early in the story. The magi announce that they have come from the East to Jerusalem in order to pay homage to Christ. That is the reason for their journey. And when Herod tries to trick the magi, to hoodwink them into returning with the child’s location, he picks up their language alleging that he too wants to come and “pay homage” to the newborn child. And when the magi at long last arrive, it is written by Matthew that “they knelt down and paid Christ homage.” Matthew’s story of the magi begins with homage, continues with homage and ends with homage.

Nothing could be clearer: the fourth and by far the most valuable gift that is offered to Christ is not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but the complete and absolute giving of ourselves to Christ.

“What shall I give him, poor as I am?” asks the melodic Christmas carol, *In the Bleak Midwinter*. If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part”

And what is that part? Simply paying homage to the One who is the Messiah, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

“What I can give him” concludes the hymn, “I can give him my heart.”

How will we give ourselves to the Christ this coming year? What discipleship commitments will we make? How will we enrich our spiritual lives? Will we be both informed and formed by the Word? Will we take time engage in theological questions and dialogue as we ponder and claim a theology for our day and time? How will we put our faith into practice in 2009? Will we make time for prayer? worship? study? and action? Will we give generously to the ministries and missions of Holy Trinity?

As we step into the New Year, we, like Matthew’s community are called to the pattern of the magi.....to begin our journey with a single gift: homage to Christ  
to continue our journey with a single gift: homage to Christ  
to end our journey with a single gift: homage to Christ

May God delight in our commitments and bless our endeavors. Amen and Amen.

\* Tom Troeger’s insight and inspiration in Winter ’97 *Biblical Preaching Journal* helped to inform this reflection on “The Fourth Gift.”