

The Gift of the Magi
by Rev. Susan Morrison
Epiphany Sunday
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Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift 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. ⁵Then 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. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

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, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'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.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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."

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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 him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Epiphany is both a moment and a season on the Christian calendar. The moment is January 6th, the 12th day of Christmas, when, traditionally, the astrologer kings found the Christ child and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The season is from January 6th until the beginning of Lent; this year Ash Wednesday will fall on February 17th. which will bring the season of Epiphany to a close. This Epiphany season offers us scripture lessons that recollect the many ways that Christ is manifested in our lives. Its symbol is light. Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled: "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of God has risen upon you!" The Christ candle on our Advent wreath, which we lit on Christmas Eve, is here to stay. And we have celebrated the coming of that Light into our world with birthday parties galore for this newborn Child of God. Ah! how well we have gifted one another. But today, for our Epiphany celebration, it is time to contemplate and then to offer our gifts to God.

If the three wise men truly live up to their name, surely they have something to teach us about offering gifts to God. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were all very appropriate gifts for royalty.

Gold is very precious! Its value has increased impressively this past year. Anyone who has their investments in gold have value in the market. Recently, during our Stewardship Campaign, we have all brought some of our own gold in the form of financial pledges to the manger in Bethlehem. Those financial commitments are as precious as gold, not because they support an operating budget here at Holy Trinity, but because they are our response to the abundant life with which God has blessed us.

One could do worse than bring gold to the manger. But what about frankincense? What gift could be more appropriate to help mask the animal odors in the barn? These beads of resin, when ground into a powder and burned, become balsam smelling incense. I am reminded of the importance of the fragrance of any offering or sacrifice made in the Temple by our Hebrew ancestors. And then I think of Jesus, who showed us how to live life so that life itself becomes a fragrant, living offering to God – the fragrance of loving God and neighbor; the fragrance of extravagantly sharing our wealth with others; the fragrance of working for justice and peace and systemic change wherever there is oppression.

Howard Thurman captures this fragrant offering of ourselves to God in one of my favorite pieces called *The Work of Christmas* that is printed in your bulletin this morning. What is this "work of Christmas?" this fragrant offering of ourselves to God? It is as sweet as frankincense when we find the lost and heal the broken; feed the hungry; release the prisoner; rebuild the nations, making peace among all peoples.

Gold is good; frankincense is fine and so is myrrh. Myrrh is costly perfume. In ancient times, it was used for beauty treatment and for scenting clothes. And it was an important ingredient of the sacred anointing oil for royalty at the time of death. Brought to the manger, I see myrrh as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death. Remember, Mary Magdalene pours it over Jesus before he enters Jerusalem for the last time. And then it is offered to him on the cross, wine mingled with myrrh. And the women bring it to the tomb for the anointing of Jesus' body on Easter morn.

It is true that Jesus lived so radically aligned with God's intentions that he was killed and died and was buried in a tomb. In doing so he fulfilled the beatitude that he preached saying "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." If we're serious about bringing myrrh to the manger, perhaps we must ask ourselves, "To what do I need to die in order to fulfill God's intentions for my life?" because only then will our myrrh offering have integrity.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh are all fine gifts, but I would be bold to suggest a fourth gift, one that is not a present, but a presence, because each of these wise men also brought themselves to the birth place of Jesus and in doing so, what they offered with their sheer presence was the gift of love. Three times in this brief narrative it is noted that they came to pay in homage. The story the wise men begins, continues and ends with homage, a word that connotes devotion, respect, an offering of oneself in humbleness and adoration to another.

Surely that it the unnamed "fourth gift" – the gift of ourselves to God, given in love and with love.

O'Henry brings this "fourth gift" to life for us in his magnificent short story, *The Gift of the Magi*. Do you know the tale?

"One dollar and 87 cents" begins O'Henry. That was all that Della had to spend on her beloved Jim for Christmas. One dollar and 87 cents and 60 cents of it was in pennies. But oh! how she wanted to gift her beloved husband with love on Christmas Day. And so she did the only thing possible, she sold her most precious possession in order to buy him his Christmas present. And that precious possession was her beautiful hair.

Writes O'Henry, "Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window someday to dry, just to deprecate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts." And so off she went, the day before Christmas, to sell her cascading brown hair to Mme. Sofronie for \$20.00. And then with the \$21.87 she ransacked the stores searching for Jim's gift. At last she found it. Surely it had been made for him and no one else. It was a platinum fob chain that would hold his gold watch which was his prized possession, a watch that had been his fathers and his grandfathers. \$21.00 the clerk took from her for the chain and she hurried home with 87 cents in her purse.

When she got home, she got out her curling iron, lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Soon her head was covered with tiny close-lying curls. By 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

“Jim, darling,” she cried, “don’t look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn’t have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It’ll grow out again, you won’t mind, will you?”

“You’ve cut off your hair?” asked Jim.

“Cut it off and sold it,” said Della.

“You say your hair is gone?” he said as he drew a package from his overcoat pocket. “If you’ll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first.”

Nimble fingers tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick change to hysterical tears and wails. For there lay The Combs – the set of combs that Della had worshipped for a long time in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims – just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. She hugged them to her bosom, and at length smiled and said “My hair grows so fast, Jim!”

And then Della leaped up and cried “Oh, oh!” Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. “Isn’t it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You’ll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on the new chain.”

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled. “Dell,” said he, “let’s put our Christmas presents away and keep ‘em a while. They’re too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on.”

Concludes O’Henry, “The magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”

As we renew our covenant with God this morning, let us bring to the One who is Holy our gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but most of all, let us offer our God the best that we have to give, and that is our love. For when we offer ourselves through love to God we too will be among the wisest everywhere. So be it. Amen and Amen.