

Pastor's Message – 1/7/2024  
Epiphany  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

As 2023 turned over into 2024 last weekend, I spent some time filing papers and going through old records in my banker's boxes – filing last year's records and shredding other records that were 7 years old. The 7-year rule is not hard and fast, but at least gives us a guideline on what to keep and what can be discarded. In the process of reviewing files, I found old records from the purchase and insurance coverage on my previous car – the one I traded in this past September. As I was looking at those, I wondered if those records were of any value to keep.

As I consider downsizing in the future, I wonder what is really valuable to hold onto. Some say, "If you bring one new thing into your house, you should discard two older things." Not a hard and fast rule, but a guideline in managing the stuff we accumulate over the years. Perhaps you wonder too, just what is valuable in your life – what to hang onto and what to discard? You probably have many things of value in your lives. As you consider things and memories, what do you consider most valuable in your life?

Today we have a story of **the** most valuable thing ever found in the history of the world. The arrival of the Wise Men Matthew writes about is one of the most familiar stories connected with Jesus' birth. I think it is the most important part of the Christmas story. Some people may think it's strange, but I send my Christmas cards so they arrive after Christmas Day and my Christmas cards always picture, in some way, the visit of the Magi. The Christmas season lasts until Epiphany: the arrival of the Three Kings.

When most of us imagine the Wise Men -- or the Magi, as they're more properly called -- we picture three kings, each one perched on a camel and holding out before him a fancy gift box. In reality, though, we don't know how many Magi there were (the only reason for the threesome is the fact that the Bible mentions three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh). There could have been two Magi carrying those gifts -- or twenty. Early Christian art often has more than three and is not consistent.

There's no reason to believe they're kings, either. Matthew just tells us they're wise men: scholars of the ancient arts of divination, who discern in the stars evidence of the birth of a new and mighty king. Isaiah -- not Matthew -- is to blame for the king thing. The prophecy of Isaiah that is today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures -- "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (60:3) -- came to be interpreted, in later years, as referring to these visitors from the east. Somebody back in the early days of the church was reading Isaiah side-by-side with Matthew, searching for prophecies about Jesus. That person wondered, "Now if those eastern visitors were kings, then we could count another prophecy fulfilled" -- and they've been kings ever since, in most people's minds (and on many people's Christmas cards).

They probably don't show up at the stable in Bethlehem, either. All Matthew tells us is they arrive at "the place where the child [is]." A couple of verses later, he identifies this place as "a house," not a stable. Mary and Joseph would hopefully not have spent more than a single

night bedded down with the livestock if they could help it; by the time the Magi arrived, they probably would have upgraded their accommodations.

These wise men are used to studying the stars for hints of God's intentions. Whatever you think of astrology, it was, back then, an accepted way of figuring out what God was up to in the world. Matthew tells us God used their celestial observations to bring them to Bethlehem.

In any event, when they get to Jerusalem, the Magi are uncertain enough about their destination that they stop looking at the night sky for a time. They begin following their common sense, instead. That's how they get to Herod's palace -- the reasonable place anyone would have expected to find a newborn king in Judah.

They have always fascinated us, these travelers who must have loomed in the entrance to the cave or stable before an astonished -- and possibly alarmed -- Mary and Joseph. All the language we use about them tends to reach for a larger-than-life quality. One of the church's hymns claims that to rival their gifts we would have to bring to this "brightest and best of the sons of the morning, odors of Edom, gems of the mountain, pearls of the ocean." When Isaiah speaks of such visitors, he speaks in the most extravagant terms. "Kings!" Isaiah proclaims. "Kings come to the brightness of your dawn." And because the traditional three camels do not seem enough to do justice to the celebration, we turn to Isaiah's evocation of "a multitude of camels ... the young camels of Midian and Ephah." Then, "all those from Sheba" are invited, too.

But even Isaiah fails to satisfy our wish to paint a vast and wonderful canvas for these visitors to the stable. We go to Psalm 72 for more vivid images, and there the psalmist obliges by bringing on stage "the kings of Tarshish and of the isles ... the kings of Sheba and Seim," saying of them that they "all fall down" before this child.

The visit of the Magi seems even more important when we consider who wrote about their visit: Matthew. Each gospel writer, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were writing to a particular audience and Matthew, with his emphasis on the fulfillment of the prophecy of a coming Messiah, was writing to convince Jews that Jesus was the One. So, for Matthew to write about foreigners, Gentiles, wise men from the east, is a powerful reminder that Jesus comes for all people and not just as a Messiah for the Jews.

I suspect that none of us hearing this Message today and few if any who will read it have any Jewish heritage Jews, so the story of the coming of the Magi is important for us to hear. The story is a transition from what happened then to what is happening now -- a transition from those who witnessed the story unfolding then to us hearing about it now.

This Sunday, Epiphany Sunday, is a transition Sunday, the ending of the Christmas Season and the beginning of the rest of the church year. This transition is the third stage in the cycle of light or the cycle of the nativity -- all themes of the birth of Jesus. First, we have Advent, the four weeks before Christmas; then we have Christmas itself, followed by Epiphany Sunday.

It is on this Sunday, Epiphany Sunday, on which we hear of the Magi and their gifts.

You can probably imagine; you may have heard, that there is a meaning behind each of the gifts.

1. Gold was a gift given to kings.
2. Frankincense was a gift for a priest.

3. Myrrh was a gift of perfume for burial preparation.

The Magi bring gifts, but the bigger gift was the gift given to the world by God. The birth of Jesus was a gift to all the principal characters of the Christmas story, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the Magi and to all who have heard the story. Some search for Jesus; some do not. Some receive the gift; some reject it. However, the gift, Jesus, cannot be ignored. Any gift takes work; any gift must be accepted or rejected. It takes conscious effort and action. The story of the Magi is less about the searching and seeking, than it is about finding and receiving a gift of value.

Although the gift is more God's doing, the gift, any gift, calls for a response. Traditionally there is a theme for each of the Sundays in Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas: hope, peace, joy, and love.

Hope is not passive but rather a state of readiness and preparation.

Peace is a matter of lifestyle, a way of living in our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities.

Christmas joy is like Simeon, when he held Jesus at Jesus' presentation in the Temple, not holding back. Simeon held Jesus and proclaimed, "This is the One – the One I have long waited for!"

The love come down at Christmas is a reminder that we are loved, and we are to love in response.

Epiphany is a time to get up and go – to put these good gifts to use and purpose.

In chapter 60, where Isaiah prophecies the Magi, he writes about particular characteristics that the world will experience when the Messiah comes: glory, light (and darkness), gathering of people near and far to experience joy and abundance. Those are gifts that God gives. At the finding of the Christ child, the magi gave gold, incense, myrrh. As you hear the story again, as you find the Christ child again, what are you called to give?

What gifts of value do you bring?

1. Perhaps a regular tithe, 10% of your income, in the offering.

2. Perhaps a son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter, encouraged to go into ministry as a pastor.

3. Perhaps something you can do in service in the church.

4. Perhaps regular attendance at Sunday worship.

Where do you think the star might stop in your community "... over the place where the child is" now?

1. Perhaps your own home where Jesus' presence is acknowledged and faith is shared and God is talked about.

2. Perhaps your own church where Christ is actually present in the sacraments and preaching and ministry to others.

3. Perhaps one of the ministries in the community like the Food Pantry or Salvation Army bell ringing.

That's what can happen in our community, but what happens to *us* when we experience this glory?

What happens is that we discover that *Jesus is the light of the world*.

As the light of the world, Jesus —

Drives away sin, isolation and despair;  
 Gives us the gift of forgiveness;  
 Gives us the gift of Christian connection;  
 Gives us the promise of eternal life;  
 Changes our attitude to the world around us; and  
 Invites us into the reign of God.

On the Day of Epiphany, we remember the coming of the light of Christ into the world, a light that *drives away the darkness of sin, isolation, and despair*. With Jesus, *we have the gift of forgiveness* whenever we fall into destructive behavior or wander into dark ways of life. With Jesus, *we have the gift of Christian connection* — with Christ and with each other — whenever we become isolated or alienated from others.

Jesus also *gives us the promise of everlasting life*, which can ward off depression and despair. “You shall see and be radiant,” promises Isaiah; “your heart shall thrill and rejoice” (v. 5). When the light of Christ illuminates our lives, we realize that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

The magi willingly traveled great distances and risked their safety in hopes of finding what the stars were pointing to. What do you risk along your faith journey? How do you as a disciple, a seeker and a follower of Jesus also travel a similar journey? Christians are children of light, and we cannot afford the luxury of despair. We bring hope to the hopeless -- even, and especially, when that hopelessness is disguised as bravado. We know that the only hope for our country and the world is not to be found in giving in to the myth of redemptive violence but by offering love, kindness, forgiveness, and peace, as did the Savior.

During election campaigns, candidates sometimes use the slogan "All politics is local." What that means, of course, is that if you elect them, they'll take care of your district. They'll make sure that you get your needs right here taken care of. But the problem comes if our whole country is run by that motto -- all politics is local -- then who's looking out for the big picture? Who's taking care of the country if everyone is just looking out for their own little piece of it?

Our motto cannot be "All religion is local." We sometimes take our Christian faith and end up thinking that all that really matters is what happens right here, right inside the four walls of our particular church. But the arrival of the Magi is an indication that Jesus' significance goes beyond local parameters. The message of Jesus is a message for the entire world.

What you do here matters in the big picture. Who you touch in your life touches others and they, in turn, touch others. The gift that you are given, and then a gift shared, shines light not just here, but in places far and wide. Your gift is a gift of value, perhaps even to the end of the earth.