

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022  
Matthew 2:1-12

Having just come through Christmas and celebrating the coming of the Magi today, I'm thinking about gifts. Are you the type that likes the surprise of Christmas gifts? By that, I mean, you don't want to know what you are getting, or you like to get something for someone else that they don't anticipate, thereby surprising them? I, for one, have gone the way of making the most of the expenditure of money at Christmas. I tend to be very specific in my Christmas requests. Item, brand, model number, the location where one can find the best price. I mean, if you are going to spend the money all at once in December and be mildly nauseous at the credit card bill, you might as well come away with something you were going to purchase anyway. That has become my thinking. Holly has gone along, but not because she is wild about the approach.

Holly likes the surprise, but I would argue, not just any surprise. There is a certain range of acceptable items she hopes you will come up with "on your own." So not really that much of a surprise. Therefore, when I ask her what she wants for Christmas, I prefer just to have the model number.

What guides your gift giving? Is it the practical need? Are you like me, if you are going to give, you might as well give something they need or would likely have to purchase anyway? Or are you going for the surprise? Or are you going to go for the thing they wouldn't buy themselves? Or are you just trying to get something because you have no idea what to give, but you know you have to give something?

In addition to Christmas giving, it is the season of being solicited for donations. I have noticed lately about 47 different appeal letters in my email. About 37 of those are educational institutions that I have attended. My bad... But the others are non-profits asking for donations, from Trout unlimited to Poem-a-day to Crosspurpose to Sojourners. And it makes me wonder again, what compels us to give?

This is a question prompted by the wise men of our gospel story. Why did they give? In a world of limited resources and a bent toward practicality, what would cause them to travel great distances with costly gifts just to bestow them on a baby born to peasants in the stable of a small house? Were they going for the surprise? If they were going for the get something they need approach, they might have missed the mark.

I saw a Facebook meme once that said the wise men came bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then the even wiser women arrived bearing diapers, blankets, and casseroles. Surely gold, frankincense, and myrrh were not on the list of things they needed or were going to get for themselves anyway. What real use does a peasant family have with these things? These seem like a good guarantee to get mugged on their way home.

So it makes me wonder all the more what motivated or shaped their gift-giving?

We learn very little of the Magi. They are not named, nor are their lineages or their homes. We are told they are wise men of the east. They likely traveled the great trade routes, routes that eventually ran from Rome through the middle-East to the Far East, all the way to the Pacific. It was probably in the 6th and 5th centuries before Christ that the great and exotic resources of the Far East were discovered, and started to be brought west, back through the middle east, all the way to Rome. And during the rise of Greek culture and of the Roman Empire, these fabrics, spices, perfumes and such were brought to the west along what has been called the “silk road.” This old trade route is the setting for our Magi; these men of the East who come, reading the stars, traveling in caravans, with camels and beautiful garments, with spices and perfumes, and bearing their rare and treasured gifts to pay homage to a new-born king.

We are told that they were watching the stars. They are the type who are attentive to the skies. In the Ancient Near East, there was a general aesthetic that saw the world as a type of tablet of the divine. Inscribed into the world was a sense of the order of things and the wishes of the divine. The body too was a tablet within which God inscribed the order of the world. Hence the commonness of omens, and of reading the liver or the entrails of an animal, because inscribed upon the innards of living beings was the hand of the divine and the order of things, if we can only discern it. In the Qumran community, who produced the DSS, bodily wholeness was an important value; for the body reflected the order of the world. Being a community focused on preparing themselves for the apocalyptic age, they were focused on being an image of that wholeness, therefore attentive to their physical bodies.

So too it was with the heavens, celestial bodies, and stars. Inscribed in the stars was the hand of the divine, the order of the world. What did these Magi discern there in the stars? They discerned divine activity, that a King was born to the Jews, written on a tablet unnoticed by most, and indiscernible by nearly all. But these who discerned it, these Magi, these wise men, they saw it, and they responded.

They traveled far, bearing the spices and perfumes, and gold of the Far East. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Yes, from the perspective of a young family bearing a child, away from their home, staying in a small house, these gifts do not really meet a practical need. But from the perspective of an announcement that a king has been born to a small, disenfranchised people, a birth inscribed upon the universe; it is quite a fitting gift.

We give for many reasons. And as practical people, it is sometimes for practical reasons. But other times, we give as an expression of appreciation, or as a way of saying I love you, or as an expression of friendship or relationship. We may give something that reflects the person we are giving to, like their favorite music, or we may give something that reflects ourselves, like something baked or made by our own hands.

The gift of the magi was not practical. In fact, I wonder if Mary and Joseph made one of those smiles of feigned surprise, not even knowing what frankincense was. It was not the most practical, but it was a fitting gift, nonetheless. It was a gift that sought to express how important this child was, as it was written in the tablet of the skies. In fact, there is an expression that is repeated three times in this passage: “to pay him homage.” They came such great distance with such rare and costly gifts, to pay him homage; because it was who Jesus was that dictated the gift, it was a response to what they saw inscribed into the fabric of the world, not so much the practical-ness of the moment.

I look back to a younger version of myself, to my first years out of college working as a church youth director as well as the local Young Life staff. The salary I earned those first 4 or 5 years would hardly pay our mortgage these days. I had little for social or personal life. But I was probably my most generous self in those days. I gave my life to those ministries and to the church, to those kids whom I reached out to, and prayed for. I was probably most like the magi in that season of my life. Because, for me, inscribed into the pages of scripture was the narrative of how God sacrificed the distance and the comforts of heaven to take on our humanity, to serve rather than being served, who sought us; who pursued us even to the cross. Inscribed into my heart was the story of God’s pursuit, of the Father of the prodigal son who watches and waits and runs. I think that is why I spent my twenties driving teenagers around, and holding overnights, and praying for them, and grieving over them.

I’m not sure how I got from all that to be the boring old man I am today, listing make and model numbers on my Christmas list. But considering the Magi this

morning makes me wonder how to get back to that sense of a fitting response. It makes me want a fitting gift to offer to the King whose entry was inscribed on the universe, now inscribed on our hearts, like tablets of the divine.

As I am prone to remind us, in our Reformed tradition our gifts and our service flow from gratitude and from a recognition of God's great love for us. We give not to earn favor, or to atone, but to express our love and gratitude for the goodness and grace already extended to us. Like the magi, we give as a reflection of the one we give to.

Now, I am obviously veering away from the notion of Christmas giving, and towards the question of how we enter a new year, how we structure our lives and choices as a response to God's entry into our world.

In this season of Epiphany, I invite us to look around, to see the order of the world, the hand of God inscribed upon people, the creation, the living things around us. What do you read there? Do we detect the story of a lavish God, who did not hold back his only son, but freely sent him forth for us all? Do we detect the story of a new community of love and care based not on our accomplishments or our resumes, but based in our being loved by God, and in need of community and grace. Do we detect in the flowers that decorate the hills a God who delights in what he creates? Do we discern in the pages of our lives a God who has been faithfully present, loving and guiding, and providing?

Then may what you carry forward into this new year be a reflection of all that. Bring your gifts into this new year, pay him homage, and tell us what you have read inscribed in the fabric of this world, inscribed on your own heart, inscribed into the story of our lives.

### *The Visit of the Wise Men*

**2** 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 him 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.