

“No Gift Returns”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
January 10, 2010
Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7 and Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas is over. The tree comes down after worship today. We are past the twelfth day of Christmas with its twelve drummers drumming. The family has gone home, the New Year has begun, we are back to work. The excitement of opening presents has turned to questions of where to put the new gifts, and soon the credit card bills will come due. The Christmas season of gift giving is over.

And then come marching in the magi, wise men from the east, bringing gifts. In their play last Sunday, the children and youth captured it well, I thought. All the other characters had exited the stage, leaving Mary and Joseph alone with baby Jesus when these mysterious magi come in, following a star.

When the magi entered the house, they knelt down and paid the child homage. They treated him as the king they knew him to be – though just a child, born in meager circumstances. And they opened their treasure chests, and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gifts they thought fit for a newborn king.

Over the years we have filled in the picture to Matthew’s account. We have grown comfortable with the song “We Three Kings,” despite the gospel never calling them kings, nor specifying how many. (We Three Kings – one of three words in the title, but still, a good song). Down through the centuries legend has provided names and even countries of origin, though again, the gospel story itself is silent. Drawing on the work of another scholar, Raymond Brown, Tom Long writes,

All of this speculation and embellishment may seem way beyond the strict bounds of Matthew’s text, but it may not be outside of Matthew’s overall aim. “This imaginative reflection on the magi is not too far from Matthew’s own intent,” . . . Thus, for Matthew the wise men were not only characters in the story of the birth of Jesus; they were also representative of people in his own community, Gentiles who adored Christ. So, when we dress the neighborhood children in yellow bathrobes and send them traipsing down the church aisle toward the manger, carrying foil-wrapped boxes of simulated gold, frankincense, and myrrh, we are, in a real sense, doing what Matthew himself did, seeing the characters of this ancient story in the light of the faithful people around us.¹

If this is correct, Matthew’s gospel encourages us to use our imagination about who these magi, these wise men, were. I love the playfulness of the artist He Qi’s *The Dream of the Magi* on the bulletin cover. Wrapped up as they are in a blanket decorated with a Christmas tree. Two asleep, another with his eyes open. And the angel pointing out the star they are to follow.

The gospel says that they opened their treasure chests and offered Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. With our imaginations needing no further approval, we might wonder how long they spent searching for these gifts. Were these gifts of great significance or last minute ideas? Were they the best-selling items on gifts.com or clearance items at the travel stop? Did they think to include a gift receipt, in case the young family could think of no practical use and needed to return them?

Over the two thousand years, much has been made of the gifts they brought. Linking the three items to deep symbolism. Some of the most common suggestions are that the gold is a kingly gift, the frankincense is used by priests in their rituals, while the myrrh, a spice used in preparing bodies for burial, serves to foreshadow what will happen to Jesus. Maybe so. But current biblical scholars are hesitant to make too much of possible symbolism. Biblical scholar Warren Carter pokes some holes in that theory, including noting that later in the gospel (Matt. 10:9) gold is linked with common folks, so that does not necessarily indicate great wealth. The point is, says Carter, that they open their treasure chests and “give what they have.”²

And that is enough. It has always been that way for the people of faith. We use what we have – we open our treasure chests and our tool kits and find that we have gifts suitable to give to Jesus.

This theme: that God will provide what we need comes echoes throughout the Bible. And it emerges again in Isaiah, “I have called you by name, you are mine when you pass through the waters, I will be with you” (43:1-7). And when we baptize Jack in a few minutes, we will remember God’s promises, even as we make our own promises to help him grow in the faith.

This theme that what we have will be enough to be used by God as gifts is symbolically represented in how we celebrate communion in our tradition. It is not mysterious holy bread, bought in some religious store. Our Directory for Worship says that “bread common to the culture of the community should be provided” (W-3.3610). So we take care to use bread from our community: bread used in our Wednesday lunches, bread from different cultures here within us – bread that is common, used for sacramental purposes. And as we prepare to receive the communion, we say that these are the gifts of God for the people of God.

We will be ordaining new elders and deacons and installing others to serve a second term. They are not perfect people, though they are pretty cool. They are not more holy than the rest of us. But we have seen their faith in action, and we have experienced their unique skills and personalities – their gifts – and that is why they were nominated and elected and found fit to serve as elders and deacons.

A “triple crown” if you will, of ritual actions in worship today. Both sacraments – baptism and communion – along with the ordination of officers. In each, we remember that the gifts of God are to be blessed and shared.

And then, after that trifacta is completed, worship will continue with an offering. This is much more than a collection. The ushers do not take our donations. It is, of course, an important way for people to give gifts directly to support the church's ministry. But it operates at a symbolic level as well. During this act, as we place envelopes or cash or checks or coins into the offering plate, we all consider how to give generously of our talents, our time, our financial resources. It is a time to remember the magi – who opened up their treasure chests and gave what they had to serve the newborn king.

God, who has been so generous to us, is willing and able to take and use our gifts to do what is needed in the world. God, who promises, "I have called you by name, you are mine when you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (43:1-7). God, who will be with us through thick and thin. God, who will bless us with the gifts that are needed, when they are most needed. So that we might be gifts to others, as we too, like those magi, follow the star that we have seen.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Thomas G. Long, Matthew (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 16. The quoted sentence is attributed to Raymond Brown.

² Warren Carter, Matthew and the Margins (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000) 82.