

So we're four days from Christmas. Got your shopping done? Got your pies made? Got it figured who's going where and who's bringing what to the family feast?

That's what Christmas is for lots of people in our culture. A combination of events and traditions and details that usually produces some satisfying results, but those results are usually not about Christmas as much as they are the trimmings of Christmas. Valuable goods such as family, but also seemingly equally highly prized things like commercialism and materialism, Christmas gift lists, and organizational calendars – those things are the trimmings, not the event of Christmas itself.

Kind of like thanksgiving dinner. Whatever is your passion – turkey, ham, chicken, meat loaf, Big Macs – thanksgiving dinner has some central star, right? The rest of the stuff, however delicious and filled with history, is trimmings. For many people in our culture, Christmas most years is more about the trimmings than the central star, Jesus.

For that reason and others our sermon series in these weeks leading up to Christmas has had the mission of reminding us of what Christmas is really about. We've looked at some of the basic characteristics of the Christmas season. First there was **promise** – not promise of a new car or that toy the kids or grandkids want so bad – but the promise of God to bring light to our darkness, to visit us in our distress, to accompany us along the difficult roads of life.

The second characteristic of the Christmas story that we talked about was **hope**. Hope plays off the promise. If we believe the promise, if we accept God's word that light is coming, new life is coming – then we have hope. Not about the what is – we said hope is always about the not yet, hope is about what hasn't happened yet – but about the not yet, that about which we are confident because we believe the promise.

The third characteristic of the Christmas story was **journey**. Shepherds had to run to town to see Jesus. The wise men had to travel some distance to follow the star to Jesus. We don't find Jesus where we are; we find Jesus where he is, and he is usually out there somewhere, leading us forward, compelling us to grow in faith, in service, in spiritual depth. That's journey.

Today we talk about the fourth characteristic of the Christmas story. To get to it, we first turn to the wise men. They saw the star, followed it to Bethlehem – that's the journey piece we've talked about. But they didn't go empty handed, did they? They brought those three forever famous gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Do you know what frankincense and myrrh are? They're both tree resins, saps that are obtained from the insides of trees – frankincense was used in incense – kind of makes sense. And myrrh was used in perfume. So two of the three items the wise man brought to Jesus were smells. (Got to wonder whether Joseph thought to himself, hey guys, you can take the smelly stuff back to the store for a refund, but leave the gold!)

The point of calling attention to the wise men isn't about what they brought, but **THAT** they brought. It matters that they didn't go to Jesus empty handed. It matters that when they believed the messiah, the savior of the world, had been born, they decided they needed to find him **AND** they needed to offer something to him; he was worthy of their **sacrifice**.

It's that sacrificial spirit that's missing from much of our celebrations of Christmas. Oh, it's not that we don't sacrifice: We sacrifice money to be able to buy for the people on our lists. We sacrifice time to travel to the special events of the season. We make lots of sacrifices, but usually for friends and family and ourselves; we don't make much of a sacrifice for Jesus.

Going to intrude on your personal space for a moment. What have you done in the weeks after Thanksgiving that was a sacrifice of time, of money, of convenience for Jesus? What sacrifices have you made, not to buy gifts, but to bring the gift of your life to the one you call Savior?

The shepherds don't bring Jesus gold or smelly things, but do they do make a sacrifice, don't they? They leave their flocks in the fields and run to town to offer him their worship. They sacrifice their livelihoods, at least for a while, because they believed their savior deserved at least that much. What have you sacrificed this Christmas season? Not to get more colorful ribbons and bows on your packages, but to recognize the value of the gift God has offered you in Jesus?

Sacrifice is a characteristic of the Christmas story, but it's also a characteristic of the Jesus story, and of the life Jesus will grow to call us to live. Remember the widow at the temple treasury who dropped two cents. Other people had made much larger gifts, but for them their larger gifts weren't sacrifices – Jesus said those people gave out of their surpluses. But the widow who threw in literally who two cents, gave everything she had. She made a sacrifice. What sacrifices have you made this Christmas season? Not to plan more efficient transitions between your Christmas appointments, but to show your thanks to God for giving you new life in Jesus?

Sacrifice is a characteristic of the Christian story, not just the Christmas story. Think about the rich man who wanted eternal life. What did he have to do? Sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor – the life he sought would require a sacrifice.

Or what was probably the most basic rendering of the point that Jesus ever made: Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for my sake will find them. Sacrifice.

The wise men sacrificed their time and their resources to find Jesus and offer him gifts. That's how much they valued the life he brought. I ask you again, what sacrifices have you made, are you making to say thanks to God for the arrival of Jesus in your life?

One sacrifice you can make is making time for our worship. You did it here this morning, but perhaps Sunday morning worship is on your regular itinerary, so for you being here this morning isn't much of a sacrifice. Wednesday night worship. That's probably not on your calendar. Make a sacrifice and be here. Wednesday night when we will talk about the final characteristic of the Christmas story – **worship**. I know you're busy. I know you might be tired by that time of night. The rest of us will be too. Make a sacrifice, a sacrifice of praise. Surrender a bit of your time Wednesday night to give the gift of your worship to the newborn king. And then we'll talk about how you can fill out one of these sheets to offer your sacrifice for 2015....