

“Gift Giving”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Epiphany – January 6, 2013

**Matthew 2: 1-12**

How was your Christmas? Did you get a lot of nice gifts? What are some of the things you all got this year? (Ask folks to shout out their gifts.) Did you get some gifts which you weren't that crazy about? I won't ask you to share those, because the person who gave it to you might be sitting next to you!

Christmas may be over, but it is the gifts we have given and received which last past December 25<sup>th</sup>. Gifts are what we will play with, what we will wear, what we will enjoy for the weeks and months to come. When we give a gift we want the recipient to be joyful, maybe even surprised; but most of all touched by what they receive, for in the gift we give is a piece of ourselves.

I guess you could say the magi are our example in gift-giving at Christmas. Today we celebrate Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas when the kings from the east came to Bethlehem. These wise men are an ambiguous group in the Christmas narrative. All we know is that they came from “the East,” with nothing more specific about their homeland. They are called “magi” in Matthew, which could mean any number of things, from kings to astrologers to scholars. All we know is that these magi traveled a great distance, following the star which they saw, to the place where the newborn baby lay.

For most of us, these three kings of orient are more ancillary characters in the overall Christmas play. They are the ones we recognize as bringing gifts, some of which we don't recognize, to the baby Jesus. And then when Christmas is over, we pack them up in their boxes until the following year.

However, the magi's role in the Christmas narrative is important because of how they welcomed Jesus into the world. Once they saw that the star had stopped over Bethlehem, their reaction was significant: “they were overwhelmed with joy.” These men were likely at the top of their social class, not ones who would have showed much emotion. But when they realized that their search was at an end, they couldn't hold back their joy.

The gifts which the magi brought were precious, valuable offerings to the newborn king. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the most valuable of items in those days, and represented the wealth which the magi likely possessed. They were gifts which would have been the best of their belongings, reserved for only the most special of occasions.

And yet, underlying the value of these gifts is the intention which the magi had in coming in the first place. These wise rulers believed this tiny baby to be a king, the “King of the Jews,” and as such he deserved the very best of what they owned. They gave their gifts to honor the newborn king, gifts which embodied their joy, reverence and gratitude for this gift into their lives. Their gracious intention is further deepened by their actions. They had journeyed who knows how many days on camels, across the desert of present-day Iraq, Iran, and Syria, following a star which they had read about in the prophets of old, finally arriving at the place which

the star had led them to. Mary and Joseph must have been taken aback by the arrival of these kings from the east.

And these magi were not even Jews, yet they made this great effort to welcome the “King of the Jews” into the world. They honored him, respected him, and worshipped him in that manger stall, paying him homage as they would any other ruler of that day. Those men were outsiders to that part of the world; they would have been looked upon as strangers, perhaps even seen as unwelcome by the locals. But that didn’t matter to them: they were on a mission. Matthew begins his gospel with this important statement, and continues to remind us of it throughout his gospel with figures like the Canaanite woman (chap. 15), the Roman centurion at Jesus’ death (chap. 27), and Jesus’ commissioning of the disciples to go to all the nations (chap. 28). The gift of God is not reserved for the Jews, for the Christians, for a particular group: the baby in the manger is for all the world.

And the gift we have been given is, as we remembered on Christmas Eve, “the light which shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). William Danaher writes:

*The light of revelation suggested in this passage does not differ in kind from what God has shed previously in the acts and messianic promises recorded in the Scriptures, as is evident from the allusions in Matthew’s nativity story to Moses’s birth (Exodus 2:1-10), Balaam’s blessing of Israel (Numbers 22-24), and Micah’s prophecy (Micah 5:2). But it is clear that the light of God shines most definitely through Jesus Christ, and subsequent events in the Gospel of Matthew repeat the dynamic movement of the magi’s acceptance and Herod’s rejection of this new revelation: Jesus’ proclamation of “the good news of the kingdom” (4:23), his acceptance by his disciples as the “Son of God” (14:33), and his rejection by “the chief priests and elders of the people” (27:1).*

*In the Gospel of Matthew discipleship is often likened to a kind of shining, which recalls the light from the star that shined on the Christ child. Jesus tells his disciples, “You are the light of the world . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (5:14, 16). That disciples are called to shine is important to remember in the season of Epiphany, for now that Christ has ascended and the Spirit has been given, we are the ones through whom this light shines forth (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 216*).*

God did not have to send the infant Jesus into the world to save us from our sinfulness; God freely chose to send him to us. The magi did not have to trek over miles and miles of desert to bring valuable gifts to a baby; they freely chose to come to him. The essence of gift-giving is that it comes freely from the heart.

The gift of God this season is not meant to be kept from strangers or outsiders; the magi prove them wrong. The gift of God this season is not meant to be received with lukewarm enthusiasm; the magi show us the joyfulness we are to welcome the newborn king. The gift of God this season is more than a baby in a manger; it is the intention behind the gift which should shake us to our roots – that God wanted to become like one of us to save us from all that is evil in this world, so we might be one with God.

Thanks be to God for this most generous, loving gift! Amen.