

**Sermon, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas, Year A, January 5, 2019, Jane A. Beebe**

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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.” (Mathew 2:10-11)

I find it wonderful that the response of the wise men to the stopping of the star is overwhelming joy. They have not yet seen Jesus with his mother Mary, they have not yet entered the house. (In Matthew, Jesus is described as being in a house, not a stable). Perhaps they realize their persistent faith and trust have guided them well and are able to rejoice in that alone. Before they witness the “radiant beams” from Jesus’ holy face, they have been drawn into a journey towards radiance. The star lights their way. Radiant in itself, it points the way to an even greater Light. They have brought gifts with them. Do they intuit that by giving these gifts to the baby Messiah, they too participate in the radiance of God’s presence?

We have hopeful words from Jeremiah this morning, about the return of Israel from exile in Babylon—rendered more-so by the mourning and longing that have come before. One verse stood out to me:

“They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord...” (Jeremiah 31:12)

I think of that lovely hymn: “O day of radiant gladness, O day of joy and light, O balm of care and sadness, most beautiful, most bright...” (*Hymnal 1982*) For the

three wise men this is that day. They kneel down and pay Jesus homage: a response from their hearts and souls.

“Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” There are so many ways of interpreting the significance of these gifts. I am grateful to Br. Curtis Almquist, SSJE for his insights about their meaning. As he says, “They are certainly precious gifts, then as now, gifts worthy to be given *by* a king *to* a king.” Yet it is wonderful how each gift brought by the wise men points in some way to the gifts Jesus brings to us. However, before the gifts may be bestowed, the treasure chests must be opened.

This is an obvious practical detail. However, it makes me wonder about the way in which we offer our gifts: what is of value to us. In order to choose an appropriate gift—especially if it is to express the love we have for another—our hearts, like the treasure chests, must be opened. Christina Rossetti points to this kind of devotion in her poem and Christmas carol “In the Bleak Midwinter”:

“What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am? —  
If I were a Shepherd  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a Wise Man  
I would do my part, —  
Yet what I can I give Him, —  
Give my heart.”

The first gift is gold, long considered one of the most precious metals from the earth. It is malleable and easily worked. Objects made of gold are highly prized. Gold dust and gold leaf are used to enhance many objects. In the writing of icons, the gold leaf used for halos and backgrounds is not there purely for its beautiful effect. Because of gold's ability to reflect light, it is added to the icon to represent the light of God. Gold certainly denotes royalty. Yet it also represents those qualities we most value. If we describe something as "solid gold", we are saying something about its integrity, its inherent worth. When someone is a particularly loving person we might say they have a "heart of gold."

Do you wonder what happened to the gold Jesus was given? I do. At the very least, it seems to have inspired Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom, shedding light on its true nature: how it is to be valued and sought like treasure. A few of these parables appear in Matthew 13. For example: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." (Matthew 13:44)

The second gift is frankincense. It too is a precious commodity. It is the incense used at the altar. In its scent and in the ascending smoke one is able to imagine one's prayers riding to God. The Psalmist in Psalm 142 even imagines his prayer being the incense itself:

“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,  
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”

We know that Jesus prayed and taught his disciples to pray. Once again the wise men have given something that Jesus offers us now, unstintingly. Like gold that reflects the light, prayer, too, carries a kind of radiance. Sometimes we hang on to words; sometimes we let go into silence. Sometimes we experience light, sometimes darkness. One can lead to the other and back again.

St. Symeon the New Theologian describes what can happen when praying the Jesus Prayer: “One day, as he stood and recited, “God have mercy upon me, a sinner,” uttering it with his mind rather than with his mouth, suddenly a flood of divine radiance appeared from above and filled all the room... He saw nothing but light all around him... He was wholly in the presence of immaterial light and seemed to himself to have turned into light. Oblivious of all the world he was filled with tears and ineffable joy and gladness.”<sup>1</sup>

It is probably not possible to stay constantly in this place. It is not a process that one can control or some final goal that one can say definitively that one has reached. Yet, like incense, we can watch it rise. Prayer can give glimpses of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Solrunn Nes, *The Uncreated Light: An Iconographical Study of the Transfiguration in the Eastern Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 99.

truth of God's presence in all things. It is a sure path. The remembrance of joy carries us forward.

The third gift is myrrh. As a child I loved this Aramaic word: so mysterious, "...its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom..." Myrrh was used as an antiseptic and as an internal medicine mixed with wine. Like frankincense it was a precious altar incense essential in Temple worship. Myrrh was mixed with oil for anointing the tabernacle, the high priests, and kings. Myrrh is especially associated with Jesus' death and burial. The Pharisee Nicodemus who has sought Jesus' teaching brings a hundred pounds of aloes and myrrh to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in order to wrap Jesus' body. (John 19:38-40) The wise men have brought a gift that will mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry, its end, and ultimately its transcendent fulfillment.

However, myrrh was also mixed with oil for healing. Between Jesus' birth and death he performs many acts of healing. Once again the wise men have offered a gift that Jesus in turn shares with us extravagantly. As today is a first Sunday of the month we will have the laying on of hands. You may have noticed that the oil has a wonderful scent. Even after I have washed my hands I will sometimes still notice a trace remaining. There is something about the scent of the oil that draws me in, that gently enters my consciousness, even if I am feeling vulnerable. I think Jesus' healing is like that. Each of his healing stories is a bit different. Sometimes

he seemingly does very little, sometimes only dust and spit directly applied will do the trick. I have always been moved by the woman who touches the hem of his robe. Jesus is able to discern that power has gone out of him. Something of his radiance has been released to the world. Like the wise men, may we draw near in joy to receive it.