

Sermon, Epiphany, January 6, 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.” (Matthew 2:10-11)

What a wonderful story we hear today from the beginning of Matthew’s gospel! It is a story that is unique to Matthew. Whether it is a legend told to Matthew, or rooted in an historical event doesn’t really matter to me. I am happy that Matthew has chosen to share it with us. Over the centuries it has inspired so many interpretations, songs, icons, and paintings. Because it is such a good story, details have been added that we do not actually find in today’s text. The number of wise travelers is not given. Yet now we have a tradition that there were three, and they even had names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. In the Syrian Christian tradition, there are twelve! (I am always on alert when a passage from scripture does *not* name specific names or numbers. It is our invitation to join in the scene). Matthew describes the wise men as visiting Mary and Jesus in a house. Yet many paintings and Christmas creches show them coming to the manger. During the past couple of weeks, they have been on the move in our own sanctuary, and have now come to a stop, joining the animals and shepherds adoring Jesus.

For some reason, this year the words, “Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts...” (Matthew 2:11) is what struck me. The chests themselves are not described. It is possible that they were not terribly big, although the nature

of the gifts suggests great wealth, so I am imagining the chests were of impressive size and heavy. Some interpreters of this passage in the early Church attached meaning to each gift. As a child I was always struck by how exotic frankincense and myrrh seemed. Their scents are evocative and still used as incense in the Church today. Myrrh has long been associated with Jesus' humanity and death, frankincense with Jesus' priesthood and divinity, and gold with his kingship. Martin Luther wonderfully associates the gifts with faith, hope, and love, spoken of by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. (Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, p.107)

Yet before the gifts could be bestowed, the chests needed to be opened. Usually, when we offer a gift to someone, we wait for that person to open the gift. Many families have strong traditions for how Christmas gifts are to be opened. We all have our own styles of how the gifts are unwrapped. Do we carefully preserve the ribbon and paper—or even gift tags as we did in our family? Or is the gift wrap torn off in a hurry? In this story it is the wise men who open their treasure chests in order to present to Jesus what they have brought.

We already know that the wise men are filled with joy. The star they have been faithfully following has stopped. They kneel and pay homage to Jesus, thereby recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah they have been seeking. For me, this small detail of the opening of the chests, suggests more than a formal offering. I like to imagine that they are revealing a part of themselves—perhaps even a part

they do not believe is precious to anyone, much less God. I imagine that in their joy of finally being able to behold Jesus, they are able to open their hearts to this vulnerable, baby-king. They were probably scientists and philosophers, maybe even a bit austere in their bearing. Were they reminded of their own children at home? Once they had knelt before Jesus, did they stay on the floor and admire Jesus' new ability to crawl? Perhaps it is the act of opening themselves to God that will preserve their joy—and ultimately enable them to respond to God's instructions that they return to their own country by "another road."

What does this "opening of the chests" mean for us and our relationship with Jesus? Last week, on Sunday, I visited my first cousin, Ellen, in Williamstown. We have a tradition of getting together on Boxing Day, the day after Christmas Day—although sometimes it gets delayed until New Year's! Ellen was filling in as organist that morning at St. John's, Williamstown so I met her at church. I told her how charmed I was that at the Offertory, when the elements were brought forward, they used a verse of *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."

It has been a while since I have celebrated the Eucharist according to Rite I. Eucharistic Prayer I is weighty in its precise use of language and emphasis on humility. Yet there is one passage from it I especially love: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...” (BCP) If we open our hearts, if we offer what we can, the gift does not need to be made of gold. Not to take away from the wondrous qualities of the wise men’s gifts, yet God looks on the heart. In God’s eyes, even the things we may not value about ourselves may be of worth. God is enormously creative that way!

Later in Matthew there is a tiny, enigmatic parable that has stuck in my mind this week. It comes at the end of several familiar parables in Matthew 13, among them the parable of the sower, the mustard seed, and the pearl of great price. Jesus tells his disciples, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” In my imagination I wonder if, when Jesus was growing up, he was told the story of the wise men visiting him and the gifts they brought.

What Jesus’ parable tells me is that all aspects of our lives are of interest and value to God: the old and the new, the forgotten or misplaced. On a mundane level, I find that when I am sorting through my things with an eye towards getting rid of stuff, I often find some forgotten treasure. Recently it was a photograph of my

mother driving a tractor back in the forties. As an adult she never drove a car—yet she could drive an enormous piece of farm machinery: priceless!

God, in God's infinite mercy, may even value what we choose to let go of. Once the wise men had emptied their chests at Jesus' feet, their load for the return journey would have been lighter. We, too, can give to God what we may consider our burdens. We can trust that God will know what to do with them. God has incarnated into the world as the most vulnerable of human beings to show us that this trust is not misplaced. We need not fear coming close to Jesus. These wise travelers with their dreams and starlight have given us a wonderful demonstration of the power of trust in God. Living into that trust is to be literally "light-hearted." All along the way, they listen to and follow God's guidance. The star led them straight to their destination; God guided them home. And they left with a far greater treasure than the one they had brought with them: joyful hearts.

"O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face..." Collect for Epiphany