The Gifts of Christmas

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 2:1-12

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

In the month of December, my family and I always watch a lot of Christmas movies, which I love. Many of them have some selfish, self-centered, unhappy person in the mix that undergoes some kind of transformation around Christmas time. Consider How the Grinch Stole Christmas. “The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now, please don’t ask why. No one quite knows the reason….But he got an idea, an awful idea! The Grinch got a wonderful, awful idea.” To stop Christmas from coming, he dresses up like Santa, steals all the Christmas gifts, and anticipates with delight hearing the Who’s down in Who-ville all crying boohoo. But instead: “Every Who down in Who-ville, the tall and the small, Was singing! Without any presents at all! He HADN’T stopped Christmas from coming! IT CAME! Somehow or other, it came just the same!”

For some reason the story of the Grinch came to mind as I read Matthew 2 because in that story there is a Grinch. He was more than a Grinch; he was a truly evil ruler who has a terrible, awful idea of how to
keep Christmas from coming. In contrast, there is also a community of foreigners who recognize that Christmas has come, and they arrange their lives to celebrate and participate in this great drama.

It’s helpful to understand that Herod established himself as a king by military conquest of the Jewish people and aligning himself with the Roman Empire. But he was from the line of Esau, the twin of Jacob who was considered the true patriarch of Israel. The Jews resisted Herod’s rule because they wanted a king with Jewish blood that was not beholden to Rome.

When Herod hears about this new king, he looks to the religious experts—the chief priests and scribes—to figure out what’s going on. These experts have the correct information about the prophecies, particularly about Bethlehem. And they know the right thing to say. But the problem is that they fail to act on what they know. Even at the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew makes the point that he will drive home later, that these religious leaders are hypocrites—people who profess certain ideals, but fail to live up to them.

Notice that Herod is frightened and all Jerusalem with him. And he has good reason. The true king of Israel has just been born, the kingdom of God is at hand, and that is a real threat to Herod, his selfish reign, and all the kingdoms of this world. Herod pretends to be interested in paying homage to the newborn king, but he, too, is a hypocrite who has murder in his heart.

If we read on in chapter 2, we learn of Herod’s terrible, awful idea of keeping Christmas from coming. He doesn’t know who this new king is, so to deal with his problem, he kills all the male Jewish children under two years of age. It’s an unimaginable, horrible, impossible-to-understand story. But recent events in our own day reveal that there are still people who will go to terrible lengths—like slaughtering the innocents—to make their point, to seek revenge, and to have their way.

We may be more familiar with Luke’s account of the Christmas story, but Matthew writes his gospel with a Jewish audience in mind, wanting to make clear that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the true king of Israel. And Matthew is not really interested in Herod as a historical figure but as
a foil for the kingdom of God. In his book, *Desiring God’s Will*, David Benner provides a helpful contrast of the two kingdoms represented in this passage:

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<th>The Kingdom of Self</th>
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<td>Willfulness</td>
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Herod represents the kingdom of self. He is willful and definitely ruled by self-interest. He attained his position by grasping for power, achieving military success, and by making every effort to hold on to his power and position with a clenched fist and closed heart. He is a hard and brittle man with utter determination to do whatever it takes to remain king.

The wise men serve as a true contrast, illustrating the kingdom of God. They willingly follow a star with a desire to show homage to the new born king—an act of love, an act of consent. They bring gifts, releasing the best that they have to offer with open hands and hearts. They don’t understand all the implications of these events, but they know something significant has happened, and they want to be a part of what really matters in the world, demonstrating softness of spirit and transformation.

It is remarkable that these foreigners play such a large role in this Jewish gospel. These magi, or wise men, are probably from a pagan, priestly class interested in astrology. While we admire them for their attentiveness and their action in following the star, we must not fail to recognize that God’s grace always precedes human action. God is not mentioned in this story, but clearly God is at work behind the scenes including giving this miraculous sign as a gift of grace. Unlike the Jewish leaders who had received the word of God and knew the prophecies but
failed to act, the wise men received God’s gift of grace and arranged their lives to act on what they knew.

They were wise men indeed, and there is a lot that could be said about them. We know they gave their attention to what was happening around them, and responded with intention to what they knew. We don’t really know how many there were, but they were a community of people who traveled a great distance to find the newborn king to honor him—some translations say to worship him. We know there were three gifts—very valuable gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. While we don’t really know if the gifts have the meaning that has often been attributed to them, many theologians believe that these very valuable gifts really made a difference by providing for the needs of the holy family while they were in exile in Egypt, where they fled to escape Herod’s terrible plan to kill Jesus.

We can see the extremes of the two kingdoms in Herod and the wise men, but we don’t want to fail to find ourselves in this story. The reality is that most of us wrestle daily with the kingdom of God and the kingdom of self. We manifest both in our lives. We are more like the Grinch with a heart that is still two sizes too small. I have to confess I have seen Grinch-like qualities in my life the past month. With so many additional activities and responsibilities, I’m sorry to say I have drifted into the willful, achieving, determined state of the kingdom of self more than I care to admit.

Like the Grinch, we need to be transformed. What needs to happen so that our hearts will grow three sizes? How do we experience transformation and so live more and more into the kingdom of God and less and less into the kingdom of self?

The central point of this story and of Christmas itself is the wonderful truth that Jesus is the greatest gift ever given. This gift of sheer grace invites a response. Gifts cannot be received with clenched fists and closed hearts. When we think it’s all up to us and we’re so busy pulling up our boot straps, trying to accomplish more, or clinging to what we have, we fail to recognize the enormity of God’s unconditional love and amazing grace.
So, what does this passage say to us today as we conclude the celebration of Christmas and begin a New Year? The wise men of old show us the way because wise men and women still seek him. We, too, are on a journey—a journey of transformation—that will call us to let go of the familiar, perhaps even stuck places of our lives to follow God. We, too, are invited to arrange our lives to love, worship and give our best gifts to Jesus—the newborn and forever King of kings and Lord of lords. How do we do that practically?

We seek Jesus by opening our hands and hearts to receive the gifts of Christmas that help us to live right here and right now in the kingdom of God. I said earlier that God’s grace always precedes human action. We may not have a star to follow, but long ago God had a marvelous, wonderful, amazing idea. He gave a gift to His people providing a way to live into our desire for God and His kingdom. Many of us don’t receive this gift, though it would probably free us more than anything else for the life we’ve always wanted—a life of love, joy, and peace. Do you want to know what that gift is?

The Gift of Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath holy is the fourth commandment and probably the one that is least-observed. But I want to reframe this commandment by saying this is a gift of grace from God that really does help us to resist the kingdom-of-self tendencies.

From the very beginning, at creation itself, Sabbath has declared that the Living God is the one source and aim of all our life. Not possessions. Not the striving after them. Not dominance over others. Keeping the Sabbath enables us to take our hands off of our work and achieve an effort for one day in seven so that we are truly able to trust that God is the one who is working, even when we are not. We stop our doing and rest in God and enjoy being His beloved child. This sacred rhythm of work and rest are vital to remembering who we are and to continuing to rely on God’s grace in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit rather than on our own human will and striving.
Sabbath helps us keep our focus on Christ. In his book, *Catch Your Breath*, Don Postema writes, “When I wake up in the morning and look around, the world looks like a Renoir painting, everything a little blurred and out of focus. Then I fumble around, find my trifocals, put them on, and my world is back in focus. I can see more clearly what I’m doing and where I’m going. Sunday Sabbath time does that for my inner sight. It’s an invitation to wake up and to focus on God through the spectacles of a Sabbath attitude. Not that I completely forget about God during the week. But often the vision of God’s presence gets blurred, my priorities get jumbled; my commitments seem unclear. My perspective narrows to the mundane. I’m often influenced by a *this-is-all-there-is-there-ain’t-no-more* secularism; Sabbath helps me celebrate a *there’s-more-than-meets-the-eye* reality. It is a chance to lift our gaze to the sacred, to readjust our minds, realign our hearts, reset our priorities, clarify our commitments, and enlarge our perspective. We realize that there is another reality beyond the ordinary, eager to break through. Sabbath is like a guest waiting to be welcomed. It is a promise that we can be near to God, since God comes near to us. The Holy in our midst.”

Sabbath-keeping gives us the opportunity to deliberately give our attention to God as we refocus our lives with intention on Sabbath values. Everybody else catches up on yard work or house work or other chores on Sundays, but we have chosen to rest from work on our Sabbath day. Everyone else goes window-shopping at the mall on that day, but we have chosen to cease the American hankering after possessions. We accept the Sabbath day as a holy time for carefulness and an opportunity to refocus by placing God at the center and then prioritizing everything else in proper relation to that focus. Keeping the Sabbath day *constantly* reminds us that Yahweh is to be pre-eminent in our lives, and we are invited to intention-ally arrange our lives to seek him.

As we receive the gift of Sabbath, we then are freed up to give gifts to God that we often think we don’t have time for. We have time to commit to joining others in giving God worship. In addition to the hour or two we come together for worship, we need to surround our corporate worship with a
protective time zone, a time of preparation and reflection, so that we can open ourselves to God—to give all of ourselves to Him and receive from Him what He desires. If we don’t do this, worship becomes just another activity that we do rather than a holy meeting with our Divine Friend. Worship also challenges us to allow the reverence we experience in God’s presence to shape our lives as we pray, hear God’s word and celebrate the sacraments. Meeting with God in worship enables us to carry the new life we celebrate into the ordinary life of our week, and to realign our lives with God’s priorities.

Sabbath-keeping frees us to receive and experience the gift of community. Not only do we come together for corporate worship, we spend time together with others of God’s people throughout the Sabbath day. In most congregations, and perhaps for some of us here, it is painfully true that we gather only for worship and then quickly disperse to our own tasks and pleasures. If we refocused our priorities for our Sabbath-keeping, we, as a Christian community, might find time for all sorts of things including worship, shared meals, Sunday morning education, or a small group on Sunday evenings. As families, we might find more time to have fun together playing games, taking walks, riding bikes, going on picnics. My whole point is that to be a Christian community together we need time together. Observing the Sabbath gives us the intentional time for deepening the bonds of our community.

When we keep the Sabbath, we are released to honor the covenant God by making a difference. As we experience the reality of God and all that it means to be created in His image, we are free from work and obligations and set free to care more deeply about others. Jesus was a wonderful model in this regard. In a number of Gospel accounts, Jesus was teaching on the Sabbath as was his custom, but when Jesus met someone in need, he gladly cared for those individuals, even though it was the Sabbath. Compassion was a focus that Jesus gave to the Sabbath. While he was criticized for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus showed by his actions his understanding of the Sabbath as a day meant for the good of human beings.

In her book, Keeping the Sabbath Wholly, Marva Dawn writes, “Because God’s eternity enfolds us in our Sabbath celebration…we will delight in becoming agents for [God’s] purpose of caring for the poor, delivering the oppressed, announcing the good news of salvation, building
peace in the world—not with any false idealism that we can bring the kingdom of God to its culmination in the world, but with the sure hope that God is always at work to create peace and justice and freedom and that we can participate in His eternal purpose because of the Holy Spirit’s power within and through us.”

Sabbath-keeping frees us to make sure our lives are aligned with God and His purposes in the world. I know there are ways we can live into Sabbath-keeping that are willful and legalistic, but keeping the Sabbath holy as God intended is meant to help us let go of our doing to simply enjoy being God’s beloved children.

Sabbath-keeping has been a practice of mine since my college days, and I have experienced the fruit of that practice. But I confess that in the last few months, I have stumbled. I can see the ways I have drifted into the kingdom of self. In the New Year, I want to push the reset button and begin again.

Please do not think this is a New Year’s resolution because I don’t believe in resolutions since most of them are broken by the end of January. And here’s the reason: resolutions rely on will power, but the will has no power—at least no long-lasting power. Love and grace have the power to keep us moving toward our heart’s desire. Sabbath is a gift we can receive every week knowing God uses it to help us receive and experience His gifts of love, grace, and the true power that comes from His Spirit.

I hope you will receive and enjoy the gifts of Christmas, not only this season but all the year through. And I hope you will take time to think and pray about what this looks like for you in the New Year. Check out our website to explore the communities you might become a part of or opportunities to share your best gifts for God’s glory. I believe God is inviting each of us to make plans to arrange our lives to fulfill His purpose in becoming like Christ together for the world. Let us pray.