

“What Gift Can We Bring?”

Isaiah 60.1–6 & Matthew 2.1–12

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 9 Jan 2005

Isaiah prophesied that “Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn,” and that “they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” And Matthew’s account of the Epiphany says that “wise men” “knelt down and paid him homage...they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” You may notice the parallel there. And you’ll notice that Isaiah didn’t say anything about the myrrh, which was a precious gum or resin used to prepare a dead body for burial, and that gift is probably a literary device that Matthew uses to foreshadow the death of Jesus.

We all know the story of the magi bringing three gifts, but we often overlook the greatest of their gifts, which was their journey and *just being there*. (In other words, their Christmas *presence*.)

The tradition of gift-giving through the season of Christmastide and Epiphany has a long history. So, what did you get for Christmas? Maybe you got a new bike or a CD, or the book you’ve been wanting. (I got the new Jimmy Buffett novel!) And what did you give this year? Maybe you bought your wife that vase she’s had her eye on, or you bought your kids the Playstation 2 they’ve been clambering for, or you gave your husband the weekend away he’s been asking you to go on. Or maybe you gave shares of goat or water buffalo from the Heifer Project or a blanket from Church World Service. And one of the things you might not remember to thank people for is that dearest gift: *their real presence with you*.

Woody Allen said that 90 percent of life is just showing up, and I think that’s true. And it’s not always easy. Last Sunday, two of Jean’s and my dearest friends at First Congregational in Boulder lost their 32-year-old daughter, who died in her sleep, apparently from flu complications. Within minutes of finding out, another dear friend from the Boulder church was over at their house, providing solace, running interference with phone calls and family members, and taking care of all the details of living. And our friend, Libby, took Monday off to continue helping. She’s the type of person who does that for a lot of people. Her life is a ministry of presence.

These friends, in their late 50s are not only grieving the loss of their daughter, they’re also going to be raising their nine-year-old granddaughter, just when they were planning to retire. What they are doing is the ultimate in presence – in showing up for their granddaughter for years on end.

So, here’s a question for you: how do you show up for the people in your life? How do you show up for your parents, your children, the people who are your “family by choice?” And how do those people show up for you?

The face of God is seen not so often as an amorphous voice echoing from the clouds, but rather in the presence we bring to each other. We see God in each other, so be attentive to how the people around you are reflections of the divine presence.



One of the other things I’ve noticed in this season has very little to do with the magi...at least on the surface. Have you noticed how many bowl games and other sporting events and venues are now matched with corporate sponsors? Some of you are old enough to remember when it was the Bing Crosby Pebble Beach Pro-Am, rather than the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am?

I wonder if this is largely an American phenomenon, since we don’t yet have the Glaxo-Wellcome British Open or the Lloyds of London Championships at Wimbledon...at least not yet.

It's really getting a bit out of hand: we have the Chic-Fil-A Peach Bowl, the Nokia Sugar Bowl, and the FedEx Orange Bowl, among others. But, I think the Rose Bowl is still just the Rose Bowl, though it is sponsored by Sony Playstation.

Have you ever noticed that even though taxpayers footed most of the bill for the two stadiums in Denver we have *Coors Field* and *Invesco Field at Mile High Stadium*?

All of this causes me to wonder something: when will corporate sponsorships come to the UCC? Can't you just see it: the Microsoft First Congregational Church or the Sprint United Church of Christ? Think of those big corporate dollars rolling in! We could even put their name on our sign out on Prospect Street.

Other nonprofits – universities, orchestras, art museums, environmental groups – have individual, government, corporate, and foundation donors by the hundreds. KUNC, our local NPR affiliate, has more than 75 institutional sponsors, including Plymouth.

But perhaps we at Plymouth could be subtle and go for foundations: “This sermon is brought to you in part by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.”

I doubt seriously those days will ever come, because the church isn't for sale. It belongs to God, and we are the stewards of this building and each other. The church is a community, not a commodity.

We may not have a name like Sony or Fleet Bank, but your name **is** on the sign out front: “Congregational.” Ours isn't a church that is run by elders or bishops, but rather by **you**, the members of this congregation. It's God's church, but each one of us is, in effect, a sponsor of this church. So, while KUNC not only has corporate and foundation sponsors who pay for programming, they have thousands of individuals who contribute as well, which is GREAT! The situation here at Plymouth is different, though. We manage this small part of God's church and run it as best we can, and this year 207 families are sponsoring its mission and its ministry.

Your efforts, your sponsorship, your stewardship, your showing up makes it possible for this church to reach out to people who have need for a community of faith the nourishes the heart and the mind; a church that has long been a beacon and an important progressive Christian voice in Fort Collins; a congregation that tries to put faith into action.

And I want to stop and say a bold, clear word of thanks to all of you who have made the effort to show up for this community: through serving on a board or committee, through attending worship, through singing in the choir, through teaching Sunday School, through your mission and social justice work, and through pledging.

I have some great news for you: last Tuesday the Budget & Finance Committee settled in for a long meeting to consider our mission and our ministries in drafting the 2005 Budget, which will be presented to the Church Council and to you at our Congregational Meeting on January 23. With your pledges and second-mile efforts, we have a balanced budget of \$417,000. Your pledging went up almost \$50,000 in 2005! So, thanks to you, and thanks be to God.

Again, I am reminded that if this congregation feels called to do something, we can do it!



Today, this congregation is at a crossroads. We've done a yearlong strategic planning process with your input and with the help of a consultant from the Alban Institute, and we have a vision and a roadmap for who we want to be as a congregation. We have a facilities Master Plan created with **your** vision and advice and a lot of hard work by the Long-Range Planning Committee. This isn't something dreamed up by RB+B Architects: it's something they crafted with input from **you!**

So, I imagine you know what's next for Plymouth. You know in your hearts what we need to do to take the next step in becoming the church we are called to become.

We have inherited a wonderful, 45-year-old facility that is showing signs of wear (like two furnaces that are literally older than I am and large roofs over the sanctuary and North Wing that need replacement). We've been living off the inheritance for a long time without putting much back in, and now it's time for us to look at reinvesting in the mission of this church. If we're going to continue Plymouth's century-old ministry from this facility we're going to need to reinvest in our home.

Over the last two and a half years, we've welcomed 125 new members (about 25 percent of our membership), which is great! But, we are running into the issues that most congregations would love to face:

- more than 75 persons are spilling out of an adult education forum room meant for 40;
- we have 17 confirmation students crowded into the minister's study because there is no available classroom;
- we don't have space for **both** a nursery and a preschool classroom;
- members and visitors have trouble finding parking;
- our choir gets dislocated because we need more office space;
- our congregation has trouble fitting into our fellowship hall for a meal.

Again, these are issues that would make other congregations envious, because they are *signs of vitality*. They signify that you are showing up!

I know that for some of you there is also a nagging question running around your head: *Can we do this?* First, let me say that it's normal to feel some fear and some anxiety before starting out on any bold venture, including a capital campaign. It's okay to feel the fear, but then we've got to evaluate the situation and make an informed decision, based on the logistical realities, but also grounded in discernment about what God is calling this congregation to become.

We don't need to face this venture alone. God is with us every step of the way; God shows up. And I'm glad to say that Bea Stoner will be, as well. After interviewing three national consulting firms (including the capital campaign services of the United Church), the Capital Campaign Exploratory Committee, selected Bea to accompany us on this journey.

Bea is a layperson and lifelong member of the United Church of Christ, the daughter of an ordained UCC minister, and she served on the national staff of the denomination before establishing her own firm. Bea recently guided the UCC congregations in Boulder and Longmont to successful capital campaigns, and she received *huge* kudos from both congregations and their ministers. I'm thrilled to tell you that Bea is with us this morning [ASK HER TO STAND] and will do [just completed] an adult ed. forum this morning on what capital campaigns typically look like. She is with us all week to do a leadership and feasibility study that will provide us with another source of information that will guide us. I also have to tell you that Bea really understands UCC congregations like ours: what makes us tick and steps that can lead us forward on new paths. She is also a wonderfully warm and engaging person who really knows her stuff.

I would encourage you to seek Bea out at coffee hour if you have questions.

Our decisions will have long-lasting consequences not just for those of us here today, not just for the new members who will walk in these doors in the next decade, but for generations to come. Those hearty *Volgadeutsch* immigrants took major risks to gather this church over 100 years ago. And that same spirit of discernment and commitment led people like Ray and Esther Becker to *show up* when this building was being constructed, and

people like Roland Feit who brought these beams to this site using his farm equipment. You and I are the beneficiaries of their legacy. Now we need to determine **our** legacy.

In this brief season of Epiphany, let's ask ourselves the questions that dwelled in the breasts of those three magi of old: How will we show up? What gifts will we bring? How will we be present to God and to each other?

Amen.