

**“What Gift Can We Bring?”**

**Matthew 2.1–12**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 6 January 2008**

It's an odd passage of Matthew's gospel that to us seems perfectly normal...but only because we know the story so well, and frankly, we been taught to like magi. To Matthew's readers, it would have seemed nothing short of preposterous to suggest that three magi – non-Jews, aliens, astrologers – would understand something that most of the people in Judea themselves couldn't quite understand: that something of monumental proportion had happened to a seemingly insignificant peasant woman in a stable surrounded by hay and dung. (We only surmise there were three of them because of the three gifts named in the text.)

But, they *did* understand, those wise men from the east, that something magnificent was happening. And so they chose to respond. They responded in two ways: by making a pilgrimage across the desert and by bringing gifts. (In other words, *presence* and *presents*.) While I was on a pilgrimage in Ireland last fall, Dominic Crossan posed a question for us: “What is the difference between a pilgrimage and a tour with prayer?” That's a good question, especially for a lot of relatively affluent North American Christians traveling on the western edge of Europe. For himself, Crossan answered that a pilgrimage is a journey that one engages with the expectation of encountering God along the way. And so it was for the three magi...they encountered God along the way.



The aspect of their response that I want to focus on in some depth is their gift-giving. Have you ever wondered why we give one another gifts at Christmas? Though a certain amount of it is certainly to prop up the American economy, it has echoes of the magi bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

In all cultures, gift-giving has social significance. Native tribes of the northwest US and western Canada traditionally had a potlatch – a ceremonial to exchange gifts. According to the Peabody Museum at Harvard, “Potlatches were social occasions given by a host to establish or uphold his status position in society. Often they were held to mark a significant event in his family ... Potlatches are to be distinguished from feasts in that guests are invited to a potlatch to share food and receive gifts or payment. Potlatches held by commoners were mainly local, while elites often invited guests from many tribes. Potlatches were also the venue in which ownership to economic and ceremonial privileges was asserted, displayed, and formally transferred to heirs.”<sup>1</sup> So, from a sociological perspective, there was a major function in the exchange of gifts.

In Japanese culture, gift exchange is also a highly developed social concept. When I give you a gift, I accrue merit or obligation, called *ōn*, which you are expected to repay. Persons are socially bound to one another by a sense of *ōn*.

And in our American culture, we still have some cultural expectations of gift giving and receiving. If I come to your home for dinner, I'm likely to bring flowers or a bottle of wine.

In virtually every culture, when we give a gift, we expect something in return. Recently, I read that a mendicant Buddhist monk in Burma turned his begging-bowl upside down when a soldier approached to put in an offering, in a vain attempt to earn merit toward his next life. So, the offer of a gift was declined, because it would have entitled to gift-giver to something in return.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.peabody.harvard.edu/potlatch/page2.html>

So, what about the magi? What did they expect to receive in return for gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Would gold bring honor to the Christ child, whom the magi saw as “the king of the Jews?” Would frankincense enable him to exercise his Jewish faith? According to one expert, “Frankincense was part of ... certain occasional grain offerings and of the ... Bread of the Presence. It was probably added to these offerings because it was believed to facilitate communication between God and man. It carried man’s prayer to God.”<sup>2</sup> And myrrh – an embalming resin...what a strange gift to give a child, of course foreshadowing the crucifixion. These were costly gifts, that perhaps only royalty could afford (hence the non-biblical idea of the “three kings”).

If you had such an amazing abundance and gave it freely to an infant, what would you expect in return? It also illustrates the abundance God gives to us and that we return to God.

In the study of world religions, sacrifice is nearly universal concept: that when I, a religious adherent, offer something, I attain a degree of merit in exchange. And as you’ll remember from your European history, one of the fervent objections of the Protestant Reformers was that one could not purchase grace from God in the form of “indulgences” – kind of a get-out-of-jail-free card given by the church in exchange for a large monetary gift. Grace is free and flies in the face of *human* systems of giving and receiving.

God may not need offerings of burnt animals or money, but that does not eradicate ***the need of the giver to provide a gift.***

Rick Hulleatt, senior minister of First Church, UCC, in Windsor, Connecticut, once claimed that receiving the offering was actually the high point of the ceremonial aspect of our worship: We invite the offering, people in the congregation participate by giving, it is received by ushers and deacons and brought forward as we stand and sing the doxology and then we pray together to ask for God’s blessing. Can you see, from the perspective of ritual, how central it is in our worship? *We don’t provide the gift of an offering because God needs the cash! We do it because it satisfies our need to give.*

Did the magi give gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus because the infant Christ needed those things? Of course not. They were given because the three wise men knew ***they*** needed to “offer gifts most rare,” as our first hymn phrases it. This is one of the key examples of the virtue of generosity in the Christian tradition, a virtue that affluent North American Christians make surprisingly low-key in the modern practice of our faith.



So, it comes down to us through millennia of tradition: that three people who weren’t supposed to understand the message at all were the ones who got it in advance. That God had provided terrific abundance and that they responded by giving it away. And the tradition of gift-giving and the Christian virtue of generosity that is handed down across the generations.

If you look around this sanctuary, you will see the signs of generosity and commitment: reflected in the hard work and determination of our forbears in the late 1950s and by many of us in the recent campaign that provided the infrastructure for our mission and ministry at Plymouth.

What does this mean to you individually? Do you find yourself, like the magi, experiencing a need to give? One of the ways I experienced giving this last year was through my pledge to Plymouth. I knew that it would be a tough year for me financially, since I had newly acquired alimony and child-support payments and bought out half the

<sup>2</sup> Kjeld Nielsen, *Incense in Ancient Israel*. (Leiden: J. Brill, 1986), p. 87.

equity our house. And for me it meant lowering my annual pledge to \$4,000, which was a difficult decision to make. But, what I did was to weigh my need to give against all of the competing economic interests out there. And the way I arrived at the amount of my pledge wasn't by figuring out a percentage of my income (though I did look at that later). Rather, it was by giving until it felt good. I used my own internal meter for good feeling as a way to gauge what I would be giving the church in 2008. (And Nelson Murphy's sermon prompted me, too!)

I'd invite you to pay attention to Jim Fuller's request, and increase your giving to Plymouth –not so much because you will earn some form of divine merit or because you provide a fee for service, or even because Plymouth needs the money, but because you sense the inner need to give.

The magi were attuned to something that most people in Jesus' world were not. They paid *attention* to what was going on in the realm of the spirit, and then set out with the *intention* to make a difference.

I'd ask you to pay attention to what is happening in your spiritual life and to be responsive to that. How will you respond? What gift will you bring?

Amen.