

“Gifted”

Matthew 2: 1 – 12, Galatians 5: 22 – 26

Makemie Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 2: 1 - 12

²In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.”

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶“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.””

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Galatians 5: 22 - 26

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

This ends our reading.

Well, well. Happy New Year to all of you. This text that Lee just read, is about the wise kings and their gifts for the baby. I sometimes watch this show on TV called "Clean House." I don't know if any of you have ever seen it or not? Anyway, the host of this show, Niece Nash often does very nice things for homeowners. Once she & her crew clean the house, then she will buy items for the home; like a new sofa, or living room seating, or a dining room table & chairs. Niecy calls this giving, "gifted." As in, "I gifted you new seating." Or "I gifted you a new sofa." I hadn't heard this verb, before the TV show, proving I guess that TV is educational. So now if we translated this text in Niecy Nash speak, the wise men from the East would have "gifted" the child, gold, frankincense & myrrh. And in the text from Galatians the Spirit gifted "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control."

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.”

Over this holiday period I received an email from the Rev. Bette Burris, a friend & former classmate, (Bette is a Texan) about the wise men & their gifts for the child. It goes something like this,

“If there had been 3 wise women instead of 3 wise men; they would have asked for directions earlier, gotten there on time, helped to deliver the baby & brought useful gifts.”

Useful gifts...the wise men gifted the child, gold. Whether it was in the form of coins or jewelry, we just don't know. But what we all do know is that gold is a universal symbol of wealth. They also gifted, frankincense; a perfumed incense often used in religious rituals & myrrh a precious spice used in the embalming of the dead.

Now let me say, & I think we all would agree, these are not the normal baby gifts. But all the same these gifts seem to me to be a compassionate prayer for this little prince of peace. A prayer we need to offer if we are ever going to attain peace & goodwill on earth.

So what is this prayer the wise men gifted?

Gold, a prayer that this child might have sufficient material resources for living;

Incense, a prayer that this child might have spiritual strength for the fulfillment of God's gifts in his life, and finally;

Myrrh, a precious burial spice, a prayer that in the hour of his dying it might be experienced & remembered with dignity.

Isn't this a good prayer to offer for every child in this world?

Scholars conjecture that the wise men came from Arabia, or Iran, or even the Far East. We don't know their nationalities or their language. We don't know their religion. Were they Zoroastrian priests? Sufis? Confucians? And we don't know if after their visit with the holy family they became Jewish converts or embraced Jesus as their messiah. Remember these men were learned star-gazers & astrologists from the East; who were looking for the prophesied "king of the Jews." The royal heir whose star they came upon in their research of the heavens. The word used in Matthew's gospel for "paying homage" is used in reference for royalty, instead of in reference for divinity.

Can't you just see the wise men following the star of wonder? We don't know what they expected to find in their transcontinental

journey but I think it probably was a child in a palace filled with courtly servants. Or perhaps they expected to find a member of a priestly cast surrounded by temple eunuchs. Whatever the Magi may have expected what they found was a vulnerable peasant family with a tender child. A child that was the object of political intrigue, an enemy of the state & soon with his family a political refugee seeking asylum in a foreign country, Egypt. But what ever they expected, there was the star, big & still over the manger and the Magi acted with adoration kneeling before the child & with compassion through their gifts of gold, frankincense & myrrh.

But perhaps the greatest thing the Magi gifted the child was the fourth gift. The gift of justice by refusing to return to Herod with his diabolical scheme to find & kill the child.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, just a few verses before the text Lee read on the gifts of the Spirit is Paul's warning what will happen to us if we refuse to live by the Spirit but gratify the desires of the flesh. The Apostle Paul writes as though listing Herod's traits.

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and

things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Herod is always, always, scripture tells us, the enemy of Jesus.

The wise men whatever their religion, their faith, their beliefs; refused to be an accomplice to Herod & at great risk refused to report back to Herod as he had commanded them. They didn't do it and they went home by another road.

What I want to share with you my Christian brothers & sisters is that in this New Year our integrity will be measured by compassion, spiritual courage not to be complicit with injustice but to firmly & clearly stand for human dignity. As John wrote in his letters, down that long narrow corridor at the end of the New Testament, he said, “You are a liar if you say you love God, whom you've never seen but hate your neighbor who you see every day.”

My first stop on this journey of my call, of my life as a paid Christian was at Bethel Mission in Wimauma Florida, a mission for migrant families who were almost all Mexican.

I worked at Beth-El from the fall of 1989 to the spring of 1993. I lived with Mrs. Lucille Leps during this time who was a spicy all her life Presbyterian. We lived in her home, (she was a widow with four grown sons, doctor, architect, artist, school teacher) with its 17 large rooms on the lip of Tampa Bay surrounded by 10 acres, rural, isolated. The first time I came home with 3 Mexican children, she was not pleased. But they were little & no one was home when Concha, the mission bus driver, went to drop them off after a Terrific Thursday. A few days later Tia Carmen came to claim them saying, "We went to pick in Immokalee & the truck broke down..."

Over the course of my being Mission Educator, Mrs. Leps resigned herself to the occasional housing of migrant children. But ever now & again I would catch a glimmer of her smile; Mrs. Leps had a slight overbite & a small space between her two front teeth. The children named her Paloma Blanca, White Dove, for her soft snowy hair & her gentle ways.

Sarita Rodriguez came to stay with us. Nothing formal but she was a beautiful 15 year old & her step-father noticed. It was as ugly as Galatians 5 verses 19, 20 & 21. One afternoon we were all sitting

at the bar in the kitchen chatting away when he showed up; banging away at the door, yelling, obviously drunk-as-skunk.

I heard the soft snick of double ought shells & then the click. Mrs. Leps said, in her glory, "I'll take care of this." A few minutes later the truck zoomed out the driveway, dust & sand everywhere.

"Human dignity" Mrs. Leps said, "is God given. And no male creature has the right to take it. You Sarita are a masterpiece & no one has the right to hurt you."

The wise men saw God in infant form. And I would bet his young mother, so proud passed her boy perhaps a little damp to each of the sages. And as they peered into his eyes I wonder if they saw the star reflected there. God in human form, a baby is a masterpiece. Just ask anyone. You see we are God's masterpiece, Mrs. Leps was right. God's initials are on us somewhere. We are star stuff, made of earth, yes, but also made of the same stuff as the stars. We're gifted. Amen.