



## The Surprising Gift of Bethlehem

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan*

*The Feast of the Epiphany (Transferred)~December 31, 2017*

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord..

Psalms 72:1-7,10-14

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| 1 Give the King your justice, O God, *<br>and your righteousness to the King's Son;                    | 7 In his time shall the righteous flourish; *<br>there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more. |
| 2 That he may rule your people righteously *<br>and the poor with justice;                             | 10 The rulers of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, *<br>and the rulers of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.  |
| 3 That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people,*<br>and the little hills bring righteousness. | 11 All rulers shall bow down before him, *<br>and all the nations do him service.                                  |
| 4 He shall defend the needy among the people; *<br>he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.   | 12 For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress, *<br>and the oppressed who has no helper.              |
| 5 He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, *<br>from one generation to another.               | 13 He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; *<br>he shall preserve the lives of the needy.                        |
| 6 He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, *<br>like showers that water the earth.            | 14 He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, *<br>and dear shall their blood be in his sight.      |

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for[a] Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery[b] was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12

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 the 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.

“Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

Whenever I read this line, I'm a little embarrassed to say, my first thought is: I sure wish someone would show up at my house with a treasure chest!

It sounds so magical, right out of a fairy tale. I can just imagine the heavy metal latch being pried open, the old hinges creaking as the lid is lifted. Inside: a luxurious velvet lining, cradles the gleaming, fragrant treasures: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Those, those were Jesus' Christmas gifts.

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So, what did you get for Christmas this year?

This was my first Christmas in years with gifts to unwrap waiting under a tree. You see, adults in my family just don't really do wrapped gifts. Gift cards, checks, and mostly just the refrain: “we're all too old for gifts anymore.” You simply age-out of gifts in my family. No fuss, no muss. Pass the bean dip. Yet, even as a child, gift-giving often seemed to be difficult for those who loved me. I think I must have seemed inscrutable to them. Too difficult to buy for, since I never fit neatly into the conventional gender and age based categories of consumer desire. I just wasn't the sort of boy who wanted the latest heavily advertised piece of plastic.

So I got a lot of gift cards for bookstores. Which mostly made me quite happy. As long as transportation to said bookstores was forthcoming, and my time in said bookstores not too rushed.

And yet, I always had lingering questions about why the adults in my life couldn't quite imagine their way into finding wrappable, touchable gifts for me. I always wanted a pile on Christmas, like my sister and cousins, rather than a neat stack of envelopes, plus socks and a sweater. But I always smiled, and said a polite thank you, all the while feeling a sadness I could never quite explain to myself.

Now, just to be clear and save face: I wasn't a particularly materialistic child, nor an ungrateful one. Rather, my desire for tangible, physical gifts came, I think, from a deep desire to be known and understood, and a desire to feel myself worthy of the effort of knowing and understanding.

Because gifts help us to see ourselves, through the eyes of another.

Gifts show us what others observe about our personalities, how others comprehend our values and interests, the ways in which others read us and make sense of our uniqueness. Gifts are a mirror, or sorts.

And so, not to be given gifts, in a season full of gift-giving, can make one feel unintelligible, inscrutable, and quite unpleasantly enigmatic.

So for me, to receive a feast of wrapped gifts this year, after so long without them, was something a revelation. They were simple gifts that showed me I was seen and known and loved. Not by their grandeur, but by their understanding.

Gifts, of course, are always more than the sum of their parts. Because even the simplest of gifts can provocatively remind us of our giftedness, by revealing what others see in us. And this remembering, this return to the self, can

be the greatest gift of all.

What a gift to see ourselves from beyond the confines of our own imaginations! But also, what a terror. What a profound terror.

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I imagine it was a bit like this for Mary and Joseph, when the Wise Men showed up with their treasure chest full of pricey gifts.

This can't be. For us? Really? You must be kidding! Are you sure you've got the right address?

The gifts the Wise Men carried with them weren't just expensive. They were also deeply symbolic. Symbolic of Jesus' identity and destiny. A destiny that surely would not have been comforting news to parents of a beloved newborn child. Because even though they knew that Jesus was a gift from God, I don't think Mary and Joseph had yet comprehended all that was in store for them.

The gifts bestowed were these: gold, representing kingship; frankincense, representing priesthood; and myrrh, prefiguring death.

The angel Gabriel had told Mary, way back at the beginning: "You will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The angel Gabriel hadn't said anything, though, about how unusual his kingship would be, about all the trouble he'd get in, and about how young he would end up dying.

Maybe Mary and Joseph were still imagining, even as they sat around the manger in Bethlehem, that Jesus would be the kind of savior that everyone had hoped for and expected: mighty and powerful, rescuing Israel from the hands of its enemies, through military force. They could not yet imagine, that Jesus would save in a very different way. That Jesus would save—by dying.

It's still hard for us to understand, today. We want to wait for Lent to talk about death. And yet, the Cross is always before us.

So we say things like: Jesus died for our sins.

But that's not really quite it. It's more something like: Jesus died to disarm the power of death.

Because then, just as now, death was the ultimate way of silencing someone, the ultimate way of shutting down someone who imagined a different world, a better world. Death was a primary strategy for keeping the peace.

Choose a scapegoat and put him or her to death. Redemptive violence. The Gospel of humankind.

Because, in his death and resurrection, Jesus revealed that death cannot silence love. That love cannot ultimately be killed. That love always rises – again and again and again, just as it is reborn every year at Bethlehem.

And this truth is a gift. Because it bestows the gift of freedom—the gift of not having to be afraid.

Love always wins. "Fear not. I am with you always, even until the end of the age."

And yet, freedom is also a terrible gift to inflict upon humans, revealing to us our true and full capacity to

become.

Indeed: freedom means that we can and should venture forth from our webs of safety and comfort, in pursuit of far grander and more noble aspirations. Freedom means that we can and should take much larger risks, for the sake of truth, beauty, and goodness. Freedom means learning to co-exist with the anxiety provoked by possibility.

Freedom is a terrible and wonderful gift. A gift that reminds us of who we really are: finite beings shot through with the glory of the infinite. Creatures made by God for love. A love that endlessly heals and renews the world.

A love that endlessly welcomes us. Welcomes us to join the dance of life. To dance with joyful abandon. To risk something big for something good. To live as if death has no power. The gift of Bethlehem: to live as if death has no power.

May it be so.

Amen.