



The Art of Giving Our Gift

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

The Feast of the Epiphany ~ January 6, 2019

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.

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

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

Acts 8:14-17

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.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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.

How long did Christmas last for you? Did you stretch it out the full 12 days? Could you maintain the joy and wonder for almost two whole weeks? My guess is: probably not. It's hard to make something so good last that long. Shiny and bright can start to lose its appeal after awhile. Indulgence begins to seem gluttonous. And eventually, sadly, things have to get back to normal. Or do they?

Well, here we are at Epiphany. Christmas is officially over. But for some people around the world, the gift-giving that we associate with Christmas Day doesn't happen until today: Three Kings Day. Gifts are given on the same day that the church remembers the Three Kings arriving in Bethlehem and opening their treasure chests to bestow gifts upon Jesus.

Much can be made of the symbolic significance of the gifts. Much can be made about who these mysterious kings, wise men, or magi might have really been.

But as we start this new year, this season rife with resolutions with all manner of self-improvement plans, and with the self-flagellation that comes with inevitably still being a flawed human being, I wonder if we go about this all wrong?

I wonder if we should really take a cue from the kings, the wise men, the magi as we enter into the new year, into a new year of journeying with Christ. I wonder if the question we ask should really be: What gift can I give? What gift can I give this year? What is mine to give, and no one else's?

I think of the lovely verse in Christina Rossetti's poem, which is also one of my favorite hymns of the season: "In The Bleak Midwinter."

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

I think this text offers an important clue for how we might approach our entry into the new year.

Because I wonder, I wonder? Do things really have to get back to normal? Do we really have to accept the status quo as our only option?

Could we...could we instead imagine a gift we might offer: a gift that could shift, even slightly, the rigidity, solidity, and immovability of "the way things are?"

Could the gift of Jesus, of God in our midst, inspire us to imagine lives animated by gift giving? Gift giving that makes a dent in the bleakness we so often feel about the status quo? Gift giving that transforms relationship and creates new possibilities for love and life?

Right after Christmas, I set foot, quite by accident, in the most magical of toy stores. I was overcome with a child-like joy as I explored the beautiful displays crammed full with the most wondrous objects.

I am usually a reluctant spender, and I tend not to purchase things “just because.” But something about this store made me open my wallet with glee. The clerk put my gifts in a lovely canvas bag emblazoned with a saying, a sort of store motto: something like–“a collection of intriguing objects to inspire the art of gift-giving.”

I’ve noticed that tote bag a few times since bringing it home, and each time, I’m struck again by the notion of “the art of gift giving.”

Gifts are so often an afterthought for me. Something I purchase obligatorily, because they’re expected for an event or gathering or occasion. Rarely does gift-giving strike up joy within me. Rarely does it feel like an art...not to mention a spiritual practice.

And while gift-giving need not be in the form of a physical object, it took a lovely store to remind me of the possibilities inherent in a gift. All the things that a gift can be and do. The ways that a gift can shift relationship, shift perspective, shift reality.

And so, as we begin the season of Epiphany, I invite you to consider what sort of gifts you might have to offer this year. What gift is your heart yearning to give, if only it could be set free?

If only it could be permitted to imagine that a gift could make a difference.....that a gift could liberate us from “getting back to normal.”

Because of Jesus, things will never be normal again.

Yet what can I give him? I give him my heart.

Amen.