

“I Wonder as I Wander”

Matthew 2:1-12

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I wonder is there a special wisdom attached to how we are to give and receive gifts? When I was a young Minister, I was responsible for planning the women’s Christmas party because I was the Sunday School teacher for ages 30 – 45. I planned a dinner theme and we would all prepare a dish we had signed up to bring. The invitation to the party also included, “Bring a wrapped gift and we will play a game. The limit is \$20.” The game consisted of drawing a number. Each person could pick a gift from underneath the tree or choose a gift someone had already chosen and opened. The trick was that a gift could be traded up to three times and once someone chose the same gift for a third time, this was the gift they took home. Two years in a row I took home a fruitcake. Not because I wanted to but because I ended with it on the third trade somehow. I despise fruitcake and everyone knew it. So, year

three, I took the fruitcake I had frozen from the year before and cut it into half inch slices. I shellacked the slices and wrapped them up into groups of four. At the end of my project, I had four groups of four pieces of crystalized fruitcake coasters. I wrapped them beautifully and placed them beneath the Christmas tree at our party. That year, I took home a toilet paper holder. I was honestly ecstatic and the women thought I had lost my mind. At the end of the evening, the woman who had gifted the toilet paper holder walked over to me and sheepishly apologized for bringing such a horrific gift. She shared that she had forgotten about needing to bring a gift to the party and she that her mother-in-law had given to her over the years. She thanked me for acting genuinely happy. I couldn't help but laugh as I hugged her and said, "You saved my husband's life tonight. Almost every time I have to go to the washroom, there is an empty toilet paper roll waiting for me and I have to yell out from the bathroom for

someone to please bring me a new roll because Phillip forgot to refill again.”

I wonder, what meaning will we place upon the gifts we give this Christmas? As we wander through traffic and crowded malls, who will we be wondering about? What will be our intention this Christmas as we travel to see our loved ones and watch them unwrap our hearts?

In Matthew’s Gospel, we find ourselves in Judea because Matthew wanted his readers to know that Jesus came from the tribe of Judea that produced the line of Davidic Kings. We see in John’s Gospel that the Jews expected the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem and he would be a descendant of David’s. King Herod was a non-Jew and he was a ruthless man, murdering his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, (must have been the toilet paper roll), his brother-in-law, uncle, and oh yes, let us not forget that the scriptures share that he also killed all the children in

Bethlehem under the age of two when he realized that the Magi had tricked him. Herod reigned in splendor as the theatres, fortresses, monuments and altars still attest. In fact, he began the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem in 19 B.C. The building of the temple was completed sixty-eight years after his death. So here is our beginning place: the rule of Herod dictated the mood of Bethlehem and Judea Revenue was in the middle of tax season. This historical context helps us understand the fear and selfishness of the people as Mary was about to give birth and Joseph unsuccessfully finding her a bed.

Now, Herod is counting his profits when some men from the east who have been following a new and strange light in the sky, arrive and ask him where they may find the King of the Jews. As we can imagine, Herod is outraged because he is the king and there is no other king in Jerusalem. He calls all of the Jewish spiritual leaders together and they spill the historical stories of the prophecies of

the Messiah. I can just see Herod sneaking back into his chamber like Sylvester the cat in the Looney Tunes cartoons, rubbing his hands together, calling the men who were asking where they could find the King of the Jews.

“Say fellas, you’re wise guys eh? When did you geniuses say some star would appear? (The Magi answer him) Oh yea? Well go find this baby who will be King and let me know where he is so I can bring him a present too.”

Were these wise men priests from Persia? Were they astrologers from Babylon? Were they scientists from the Orient or were they just really smart fishermen Maritimes? And how many wise men were there? And how wise could they really be if they have been wandering for a year or more through the desert just to take some gifts to a baby because they heard about a legend boy who would become the saviour of the world? Were these men just trying to pull a fast one and be the first at the baby king’s cradle

so they could get on the good side of the one who would help overthrow Herod and his Wall Street government? Were they really following a star or was Jupiter, the planet assigned to kings, in line with Saturn and together they formed the sign of the fish and they simply wanted to catch the big one? Did these men have a special revelation from God or had they simply picked up some Jewish tradition from the dispersion? All we know for sure is that something drew some intelligent and educated men together, something greater than they had language to describe. Something drew these men to leave their homes and their scholarly roles and trust that the strange light or star in the sky would lead them to whatever was calling out to their spirits. This tugging in their souls did not have a vocabulary but we know that it must have been more important than anything they had personally encountered because they brought gifts with them to lay at the feet of a baby so they would be welcome to worship. And their gifts were just as strange as they were.

We know from other historical texts that by the time these men found Jesus and his parents, Jesus was two years old and they were in a house, not in a stall for animals. Can you imagine Mary's surprise when she opens her door and sees men dressed up like characters in a theatre who fall on their faces before a toddler and begin to worship? I wonder if she looked around for candid camera thinking Joseph was finally getting her back for her story that God was somehow responsible for her pregnancy! And don't you wonder what she thought when these fellas pulled myrrh, the spice that was rubbed on the bodies of the deceased, and then gold and frankincense out of their backpacks? Where was the tricycle? Jesus was the only boy in the village without a tricycle. Were these men idiots? What kind of thought had they put into their gifts? Geeze, couldn't these guys have offered a gift that was useful? After all, they had traveled a long way, surely they had passed by a tent selling teddy bears or train sets. Diapers would have been helpful since everyone knows boys potty train later

then girls. Had they not heard about the prophecy that spoke about swaddling clothes? Jesus could have used some Osh Cosh by Gosh! Who were these men? (Who was this toddler?).

We don't know what each of these men were feeling or thinking.

These Magi are barely listed in the yellow pages of history. What we do know is that God knew who they were and here resides one of our lessons. People immigrate from many different places, bringing different gifts and traditions with them. We tend to focus too much on the strange qualities of our differences instead of realizing that the Creator made all of us and we can journey and worship God differently together. Another lesson we can take home with us today is that we do not need to depend on a spiritual leader's relationship with God to mature our own relationship with the Sacred. The spiritual leaders that Herod gathered were not the ones seeking after the Messiah, the strangers among them were the true seekers. If we expect the

faith of our leaders to grow our own faith or transform our lives, we are sadly mistaken. Our children and grandchildren need to see us pursuing the Holy with love and passion. And as we share our slideshows and stories of how we are experiencing God, the Spirit will draw our children into their own faith journeys. Another lesson for us today is that Jesus was born in Judea. The advent of his birth tells us that He came to His own people and they did not receive Him. Jesus' own family and people missed who He really was and misunderstood His purpose among them. So often the gifts we need to continue our journey into wholeness are right in front of us and we miss them. Isn't it funny how sometimes it takes a stranger to open our eyes to the beauty of what has grown dull in front of us because it has become familiar?

I'm sure the trip for the wise men was costly. Traveling a far distance for up to two years must have been dangerous at times and I wonder if they ever felt like giving up or that maybe they

were just believing a lie or a fantasy and wasting their time?

Sometimes we feel this way in our churches and we wonder what's the use? After all, our culture has changed and Hockey is Lord of the Sunday. No one needs to be affiliated to a church any longer to gain employment. Young families have both parents working and life is so busy and fast there isn't any time to worship. And who wants to wander out of their beds at -20 and drive on ice just to offer some money in an envelope and hear something that makes them feel good for only a few minutes? Why, isn't a modern day miracle the opportunity for all of us to stay comfortable and give to a charity that is changing the world from the comfort of our own homes? Let us be honest. We want to be entertained. Ministers can earn Ph.D's in Preaching – Entertainment called *Edutainment*. We want to feel good. We want miracles to convince us that God loves us. We don't want to journey in our faith, desert after desert, mountain top experiences far and few in-between, after all, so many church

leaders today don't believe in God or Jesus anyway. Tom Harpur doesn't anymore and Gretta Gosper certainly has a disparaging word to share about the reality of God as she watches her own congregation disappear.

Friends, there are so many lessons that the journey of these wise men have to offer to us. The most important one I would like to leave us with today is that these intelligent men, these distinguished men, wealthy and wise beyond my understanding, were men of great faith. They were people who were willing to risk everything to discover who or what was tugging at their souls and they were humble enough to fall on their faces and worship without shame. Maybe they did bring a fruitcake to the party, so what? Their hearts were in the right place.

When I turned thirty two years old, my daughters, Sarah and Amy were 10 and 8. They asked their father if they could throw me a surprise birthday party and he offered his support. The girls called

all of my friends and invited them to the party and gave them something to bring to contribute to the snacks. On July 9th, 1994, my best friend and I returned to my home after she had spoiled me with a beautiful lunch and walk through an antique mall.

When I opened my front door, Sarah and Amy popped out from behind the couch and yelled “Surprise!” Crape paper was taped to everything that was stationary and 24 people bounced out from behind places to join my children. A banner draped over the loft balcony that said, “Happy Birthday Mom!” in crayon. My favorite music was playing on the stereo, Yanni’s “In My Time” and candles were burning my favorite scent, “French Market”. The table was full of five pounds of peanut M&M’s, 8 bags of tortillia chips and salsa and liter after liter of Classic Coke. This delightful spread was all the food my girls had chosen and asked my friends to bring. The snacks on the table were also my favorite diet and we all enjoyed them and laughed until we were full. As my friends left, they thanked the girls for being gracious hostesses and for

intentionally creating a memory that was full of everything that was special to me. My daughters felt like royalty. When I tucked them into bed that night, after we had sung our songs and said our prayers, I held them both as close as I could, breathed them in and said, “I am the richest lady in the world because I have you two.”

Today, we are the richest people in the world because we have one another in this time, in this place for such a party as this Advent. So as we begin our journey to the moment that a love of another kind entered into our world, may we dare to wander from our complacency and offer gifts that express our love for one another and for the one that gave the gift of pouring out Himself so we could see what love looks like.

Is there a special wisdom that is attached to giving and receiving gifts, especially when the gifts themselves, however heartfelt, are ultimately futile? O. Henry’s short story “The Gift of the Magi”

seems to suggest that there is. The James Dillingham Youngs—Jim and Della—have two prized possessions, Jim’s gold heirloom watch and Della’s long, cascading brown hair. Yet he sells his treasure, and she hers, each for the sake of buying a Christmas present for the other. The combs Jim buys in exchange for his watch will never adorn Della’s hair. The carefully chosen watch chain that Della purchases in exchange for her hair will never carry Jim’s watch. At the end of the story, the narrator speaks of Jim and Della as “two foolish children...who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.” But he adds, “Of all who give and receive gifts, they are the wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.” Why does O. Henry call them the magi (traditionally understood to be the wise men from the East who came to pay homage to the infant Jesus)? Are the gifts that Jim and Della offered, despite their ultimate futility, redemptive? What makes a gift—or giver—wise

or foolish? Can one measure the worth of these gifts? Should one even try?

Amen and Amen continually