

“STRANGE GIFTS”

Matthew 2:1-12

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This is one of those Biblical scenes that has so much going on I never quite know where to look. Do I look at the star, and the light? At the prophecies and expectations of a Messiah that are the backdrop for Matthew’s story? At the circumstances of Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus? At Herod’s jealous scheming or the threat he posed? At the wise men, their journey, the gifts? There are so many intriguing details to delve into – even down to the specificity about the gifts – and yet at the same time so much is left out. Who were these strangers, really? Why them? How could so much be learned from a star? It’s no wonder that over the years the story gathered various accretions supplied by imagination, legend and tradition: that there were three magi, that they were wealthy, that they were kings, that each of them represented a different race of people, that their gifts had symbolic meaning,. By the early middle ages, legends had even supplied them with names. And in many parts of the world, Epiphany is the day for gift-giving, and to this day, the three magi (or three kings) are the ones who bring gifts to children.

They are the iconic gift givers, aren’t they? In every nativity set, every artist’s depiction of this scene, every hymn in which they appear, the wise men have gifts in their hands, ready to offer to the baby Jesus. And nearly everybody can name the specific gifts they bring, right? Gold, frankincense, and myrrh (always in that order; such is the power of storytelling!) We may not all know exactly what frankincense and myrrh are, or if we know that they are incense and spice, we very likely don’t know what they smell like, but we can name them.

Strange gifts, though, to bring to a small child, right? Who gets gold and incense and spices to celebrate a baby’s birth? I don’t know about you, but when I get gifts to celebrate a new baby, I usually get onesies or board books or a meal for the new parents. You’ve probably seen those cartoons or heard the jokes suggesting that if they’d been wise women they would have brought practical gifts – diapers, blankets, casseroles, and the like. But the wise men’s baby gifts are gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

What do you suppose Mary and Joseph thought of those strange gifts? They were simple people, probably very practical. They undoubtedly appreciated the thought and generosity, but might have preferred food or new shoes or fabric for clothing or an extra donkey or just some money. I’ve wondered sometimes what they would have done with those strange gifts. I suppose they might have sold them to finance their sudden refugee journey to Egypt to find safety from Herod’s violence, but I don’t know if that would have been easy to do or if it would have prompted questions about where people like them had obtained such exotic and valuable things.

These strange gifts are often thought to be symbolic of Jesus identity and mission: gold for a king, frankincense for the worship of the divine son of God, myrrh (a spice used in burials) for a sorrowful death. Did God somehow reveal all those very specific ideas – which we now call “Christology” - to the wise men as they got ready to set out on their journey, so that they could choose properly meaningful presents? Does Matthew name the gifts with that symbolism in mind? Possible... but it’s more likely that gold, frankincense, and myrrh are meant to represent the kind of treasures considered fitting tribute for a new king. Our gut reaction to the scene – that they offered their most precious possessions, the best they had – is probably the truest understanding.

The very strangeness of the gifts underlines this. Because the gifts are not all that is strange about the wise men. Their whole journey and in fact their appearance in the story at all is really odd. They are not just strangers and foreigners in Jerusalem and vicinity, but they come from a different culture. They practice a different religion. More than that, according to Matthew they are “magi,” probably indicating that they are astronomer/ astrologers (to us those are really different pursuits, but it wasn’t so then) who also practiced some ancient form of mystical magic. This would have been considered as strange and suspect to first century Jews and to the Christians Matthew is writing for as it is to us. And yet, somehow those mysterious gifts of their craft led them to perceive something in a star that drew them out on this journey. What did they see? How did that happen? Various theories have been proposed: a supernova? Saturn and Jupiter in conjunction? A comet? How would a star or anything in the sky point to a particular house anyway? The medieval idea that the star was a bright, shining angel makes just about as much sense. These are unanswerable questions, and maybe we aren’t meant to take any of this literally.

It’s not likely that Matthew intends to endorse or offer evidence for the validity of astrology or magic. He’s more interested in convincing his readers that the birth of Jesus represents the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures prophecies about the Messiah God would send. This story is ultimately about the power of God to use anything to fulfil those promises - even the stars, even a seemingly alien belief system – and to include anybody and everybody - even strangers, even people who think and believe differently, even those who are clueless about God’s intentions – in the divine plan.

The strangeness of this is underlined by the irony that the supposedly wise and powerful close to home – Herod and the religious “experts” he consults – completely miss the event and reject what God is doing. They have the scriptures, theoretically they ought to have been interested in seeking the Messiah, but apparently you can have words on a page and miss the living reality of God’s presence. Isn’t it still true that we can do that, sometimes?

And isn’t it true that the most unexpected paths lead to Jesus?

I had a friend once who was maybe the most social-justice-minded Christian I ever knew. He came to faith through an evangelical tract.

Some of you have probably read Anne Lamott's description of feeling Jesus' presence at her lowest moment of self-loathing and alcohol abuse, knowing somehow, in spite of an atheist upbringing, that it was Jesus in the room with her, and reluctantly accepting a faith that would reorient her life.

I've been reading the writings of poet Christian Wiman, who suddenly and unexpectedly found himself open to faith when he fell in love with his wife; a subsequent diagnosis of an incurable cancer led him not away from faith but into a deeper connection with God that includes the complexities of anger and pain and doubt and unanswered questions.

People meet Christ in prison, through explorations in science, in AA meetings, in prayer or in silence, in the birth of a new baby, because of the testimony of others, in something they read, in the love of a parent, in faces of the poor, when they experience forgiveness, in a passion for some particular work, as a community of faith surrounds them with love, as they stumble through the words of worship again and again until finally they own them, in unexpected blessings, in their own helplessness, in the heartbreaking beauty of God's world, in a call to serve.

We all have our own journeys, and because of that journey each of us has our own gifts to offer. Probably not gold, or frankincense, or myrrh, but possibly just as strange. Not too long ago I was in a group where we were discussing gifts, and one guy said that his gift was sarcasm (tho' I'd contend that he also has the gift of humor!) Now of course, sarcasm can be used unkindly, but it also can show up the ridiculousness or even hypocrisy of some of the things we believe and do. A strange gift, yes, but probably every gift is strange to someone.

Maybe the gift you bring is homemade cookies, or spreadsheets, or poetry; maybe it's healing hands or a toolbox, maybe some knowledge to share. It could be a passion for sports, or dogs, or history, or travel. Perhaps it's a deep understanding of what it's like to struggle with an addiction or empathy for troubled children. It might be optimism and energy; it might be tears or pain. It might be a habit of asking questions that make other people uncomfortable, or a thirst for knowledge, or a restless discontent with the way things are. It might be a wild imagination or a logical, scientific mind; an ability to problem solve or an ease at making friends. Maybe it's stubbornness or anger or regret. It could be strength and resilience, or it could be weakness and need. It could be brokenness just barely beginning to heal. It could be something you want to give up or a readiness for something new.

Not all gifts look much like gifts. Some of what we have to offer to Christ is strange and, especially at first might not seem worthy or appropriate. But we only have what we have and we can only be who we are. Where we come from and how we've gotten here play a big part in the gifts we have to give. The things that seem unimportant or weird or even negative can take on new meaning as we encounter the love of God in Jesus Christ. What we have learned from trouble and difficulty can give us strength and empathy. Helplessness allows us to open our hearts to God's grace. Seemingly trivial

interests can forge connections with others. Characteristics that annoy those around us can be just what we need to keep on standing for what's right. Doubts and questions help us move beyond superficial faith. Little gifts can convey great love. Words can be the vehicle for praise or encouragement. Whatever we have, offered to Christ, can be transformed from strange gift to treasure, from the souvenirs of our journey to signs of our love for Jesus. That's what happened with the wise men; that's what the journey of faith is all about.

And in the presence of Christ, we become aware that our gift giving, our giving of ourselves, is simply a reflection of the generous giving of God, who gave us everything, and then gave us himself, and continues to give us gifts of grace so that we may in turn use them, give them, so that others may know the love of Christ. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Resources:

James C. Howell, "Matthew 2:1-12 Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*