



Three Wise Gifts

Rev. David Kile, preaching
Text: Issah60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12
Seattle First Baptist Church
January 4, 2009

Prayer: "O God, by a star you revealed your only Son to all the people of the earth. Lead us now, we pray, to shine forth in his presence that we may continue to reveal him in the world. Amen.

The Feast of Epiphany marks the end of the twelve days of Christmas, a reminder that Christ is the light of the world. This image of light coming into the world was proclaimed in Isaiah to describe the exiles return from the darkness of captivity in Babylon. The prophet calls those in Jerusalem to look up and see that the time of salvation has come at last. This is the dawn of a new age, with the light of God's glory glowing like a beacon. "Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. "

Two thousand years ago, 'the three Magi's gifts' of frankincense and myrrh, land gold were worth (in today's equivalent) six hundred, five hundred, and four thousand dollars per pound respectively. Today, frankincense and myrrh would be worth fifteen dollars, and gold would be worth six or seven thousand dollars in our economy.

The Magi celebrated the Christ child with the most valuable items in the ancient world. These gifts had not only monetary value, but were gifts of health and healing, and long life, as they were prized as curative medicines in the ancient world.

Frankincense and myrrh are both resins that come from wounds in the bark of trees that grow only in northeast Africa and southern Arabia. In the first century frankincense resin was considered divine and could only be gathered by who could refrain from 'impure acts. No wonder the whole civilized world at Jesus' time was begging for frankincense as both a fragrance and a medicine that cured everything from bad breath to skin infections. Modern researchers have discovered that frankincense has wonderful antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties that make it a useful dressing as well as being a bronchial dilator that helps in lung infections and asthma.

Myrrh's value in the ancient world even greater. A drop of myrrh could double the price of cheaper perfumes and Egyptians used myrrh to embalm royal mummies. Myrrh was prescribed for a wide range of ailments and was a cure for diaper rash, baldness, obesity, and used for anesthetic (Jesus was given wine mixed with myrrh, on the cross) and also could prolong life.

Gold, considered one of nature's most perfect substances, was always believed to harbor supernatural healing powers. Today, gold injections help people with rheumatoid arthritis. These gifts given at Christmastide, by the Magi, affirmed Jesus personal gifts, his insights, his connections with God, his knowledge, and his charisma.

What equivalent to frankincense, gold and myrrh could we offer to others this Christmastide, to demonstrate the enriching, healing, transformative presence Christ's birth brings into the world? Just as the Magi offered their gifts quietly, why should we not consider practicing a kind of 'gifting in the coming year that has the power to transform the world?

'GOODNESS' There is a new 'underground' movement in society, penned by people inspired by the phrase, "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty"

At first glance you probably are saying, that's too easy. Last week, as we were driving downtown, the accumulated snow on the roof of our car shifted and covered the front windshield, at the corner of Lake Washington and Madison. Kate our daughter jumped out to clean the windshield off, and a lady standing at the bus stop, and waving a \$50 bill jumped off the curb too, and began to help, saying, I'll give you \$50 to take me downtown to catch the bus. Windshield cleared, we took her with us, and she told us her life story in the next 15 minutes. I dropped our guest, Kate and Pat off at 6th & Pike under the cover of the Washington Convention and Trade Center. In her gratitude. The woman ran back and gave Kate a 'Starbucks card'

In the midst of the 'snowstorms' Rev. Catherine Fransson, sent us a 'note about the Christmas Eve Service, saying 'let's be gentle with each other'

GRACE: Several years ago, I came across a book by author Og Mandino, who is a recovering alcoholic, who candidly admits that he owes his very existence to unmerited acts of grace given to him. Mandino is a best-selling author who's inspirational and self-help books have sold over 20 million copies. In a volume, entitled, "A Better Way to Live" he reveals some of his 'secrets' to a full and grace-filled life. Among what he calls '17 Rules to Live By' in the book, is a remarkable and easily repeatable method that everyone can practice as a kind of 'gift of grace' "Mandino's Rule Number 10 advises us to"....treat everyone you meet, friend or foe, loved one or stranger, as if as if this were going to be their last day on earth. Mandino suggest that we all think of this tactic as a new rendition of the old "I've got a Secret" game, only the secret we know is that the person we are facing right now is living his or her last day on earth' How would that affect your actions and reactions to people? What would you say, even to a virtual stranger, if you and only you know that this was absolutely the last time you would speaker with this person? Practicing the 'gift of grace' urges one to extend a depth of caring, an attentive kind of listening and an impetuous way of loving to people from all walks of life.

Mike McGrath, tells how the death of his friend, Robert Rodale, impacted him.

"What I learned---and learned hard—is that you can never really be sure that you'll ever see someone again. So it's best not to leave business undone, feelings unspoken. Bob's passing has taught me that when we say goodbye to someone, it may well be the last time we see that person. It probably won't, but it could be. So pay a compliment. Say something nice you've been meaning to say to someone. "Tell them that you think they're a good talented person; that you value their friendship, that you admire their ability that they make you happy. It's a notion you will never regret.

LOVE; Singer Amy Grant, calls this kind of love "Love of Another Kind" And it's only this love of another kind' that can save the world'

Nearly 20 years ago, there was a book entitled: "Beyond the Limits" by a small informal network of scientists, educators, economists and industrialists. It's strange to find this word "Love" featured in a book by a biophysicist, computer analyst, and a system theoretician warning us that have at most 30 years to prevent global collapse. Our modern culture, allows us only to speak of love in the most romantic and trivial sense of the word . Anyone who calls upon the capacity of the people to practice

...love is more likely to be ridiculed than taken seriously". It is, they believe, our only hope if we are to escape "overshoot" (stepping beyond the limits of the earth's carrying capacity) and maintain a sustainable world.

Practicing 'tough love' isn't easy. The skirmishes encountered for the sake of this gift cost us, in money and tears, they cost us security and sometimes even our blood. Tough love is what Jesus practiced in the Temple, when he drove out the money-changers, Tough love, inspired hundreds of men and women to break the law and shelter and aid runaway slaves on their journeys to freedom. Today, 'tough love asks us to shake off our carefully nurtured apathy and to risk being wrong for the sake of being right. The possibilities are limits, in a world stressed to the limits, with a failing economy, unemployment, war, loss of national stature These are no easy acts, they are heart-rending, costly and threatening.

Once we understand the gifts of the Magi we can better comprehend what kinds of gifts we too should be bringing. We hold in our hearts and in our hands the ability to offer Christ's own healing presence to the world every day, not just at Christmas. The gifts of goodness, grace and love, as well, as frankincense, gold and myrrh represent the gifts the Christ child truly wants from us ---our whole selves.

WE come now to a verse in this story that I love,. We read the words" "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Maybe is means, they lived another way.

Maybe that could happen to us as we begin to move away from Christmas, into the new year. Maybe we could return another way. Perhaps that is the real test of Christmas, whether or not we have found something which cannot be lost, something that will carry us into the future by another way, on some new and different roads to a new place in our living. Perhaps we can keep something of Christmas alive in us that will lead us into another way.

Long ago, Henry Van Dyke wrote these words we still remember today:

"ARE YOU WILLING TO FORGET WHAT YUOU HAVE DONE FOR OTHER PEOPLE, AND REMEMBER WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE DONE FOR YOU, TO IGNORE WHAT THE WORLD OWES YOU, AND THINK WHAT YOU OWE THE WORLD, TO PUT YOUR RIGHTS IN THE BACKGROUND, TO OWN THAT PROBABLY THE ONLY GOOD REASON FOR YOUR EXISTENCE IS NOT WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO GET OUT OF LIFE, BUT WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO GIVE LIFE, TO CLOSE YOUR BOOK OF COMPLAINTS AGAINST THE MANAGEMENT OF THE UNIVERSE, AND LOOK AROUND YOU FOR A PLACE WHERE YOU CAN SOW A FEW SEEDS OF HAPPINESS, ARE YOU WILLING TO DO THINGS EVEN FOR A DAY?"

Because of Christmas, will we live a new way in 2009???????

You can keep Christmas and you can take a new direction. You can carry with you into this New Year the greatest blessing of the season.

Its love can live in our lives, and we can share it.
Its hope can hold us up and give us patience.
Its joy can fill our hearts, and overflow into all our relationships.
Its peace can soothe our worried brows, and keep us calm within.
Its light can brighten our paths, and help us find our way. Amen

Let us prepare our hearts 'for communion and the cleansing ritual' by singing:

"Spirit of the Living God"

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me,

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.

Melt Me, Mold Me, Fill Me, Use Me,

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.