



*The Fourth Gift
Matthew 2:1-12*

*Epiphany Sunday ~ January 6, 2019
First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois
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Text: “ We have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay homage.” (v. 2)

How many of you made “New Year’s Resolutions?” How many of you have already broken a resolution or two? There is an old Yiddish saying that is appropriate for our resolutions. “Mann tracht, un Gott lacht”; which translates into: “We plan and God laughs.” One of my favorite New Year’s Resolutions is, “Resolved: Do better and love Jesus!”

Over the next few weeks we reflect upon New Year’s Resolutions. We will look at how to “love Jesus and do better, ” but, if we listen carefully enough to the silence of our soul, we may even hear God laugh.

Modern American Christian culture has woven the story of Epiphany into the Christmas narrative. Tradition says that there were three wise men bearing gifts--gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Witty women are fond of pointing out if the wise men had been women they would have arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and that there would be peace on earth!

Humor aside, the story does not say how many “wise men” there were, just that there were three gifts. Nor does it say that they are kings. They were “magi” which means that they would have been astrologers, members of the Persian priestly caste, or possibly Zoroastrians from Persia or Babylon which today would be Iraq or Iran.

In telling his story Matthew carefully wove together pagan astrology and Jewish prophetic voice; a star heralding the cosmic event and a shepherd kind from Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Matthew’s intention is clear; in the birth of This Child God was doing something new that would change the world, the whole world. In the words of the apostle, “The old has passed away; the new has come.” (II Corinthians 5:17) The world would undergo a “rebirth”. The apostle Paul wrote about this in his Letter to the Romans:

I consider that the suffering of this present time are not worth with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ... We know that they whole world has been groaning in travail (as in childbirth) until now. (8: 18 & 22)

The birth of this new world order would be painful, but the joy that it will bring far outweighs the pain of the moment.

It is the “birth” of this “new world order” that terrified Herod the Great “and all of Jerusalem”.

The “new”, the “different”, and “change” itself is always hard. It is always met with conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional sabotage and resistance. Tell someone that you want to lose 20 pounds that they will offer you a cookie, saying: “What’s one cookie? Surely that won’t matter. Besides, I just made them for you!” It is this resistance to change that causes so many of our New Year’s Resolutions to fail.

And, it was resistance to change that motivated Herod to inquire of chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem where the Messiah was to be born. It was why he asked the visitors from the East to be sure to tell him where he might find the Child they sought. And it ultimately caused what theologians call “the slaughter of the innocent” later in Matthew’s gospel.

The gifts the Magi brought are interesting not just for what they were but for what was added. In our Call to Worship from the prophet of Isaiah the visitors from the East brought two gifts: gold and frankincense. But Matthew records a third gift, “myrrh”.

Gold has always been viewed as a gift “fit for a king”, but frankincense and myrrh? Well, that deserves more exploration. Both are fragrant substances acquired from distant exotic lands at great expense. They were also royal favorites.

Frankincense was the “holy perfume” used exclusively in the sanctuary. Was the place where Jesus lay the “sanctuary” of this new reign, this new world order, this new Kingdom? Was Matthew pointing to the day when the risen and glorified “Messiah” would be worshiped as God “the Father”?

Myrrh is an interesting addition to the Isaiah words. It was used as an anointing oil by the High Priest. Was this Matthew’s subtle way of reminding or telling his community that Jesus is “the Anointed One” or the Christ at his birth?

In John’s gospel we are told that Nicodemus brought a hundred pound mixture of aloe and myrrh to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. Was the addition of myrrh Matthew’s way of pointing to the Crucifixion and what lay beyond?

These are the three gifts of the Magi but there was also a Fourth Gift. It is mentioned three times in the gospel lesson. This Fourth Gift is homage. Another word for homage is worship.

“We have observed the star and come to pay him homage”, the Magi told Herod.

“Go and search diligently for the child,” Herod told the Magi, “that I may also go and pay him homage.”

“Upon entering the house, (the Magi) saw the child with his mother Mary; and they knelt down and paid him homage.”

In feudal times to “pay homage” was to make oneself a vessel--an instrument--to a lord. It was to bow down and humble oneself. The earliest confession in the Church was a simple three word statement: “Jesus is Lord.” “If we live, we live unto the Lord,” Paul wrote, “and if we die, we die unto the Lord; so in both life and death we belong to the Lord.” (Romans 14:8)

In a few minutes we will set aside men and women to take on positions of responsibility in this congregation and in Christ’s greater Church. They will be asked if they trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, acknowledge Him as Lord of all and the head of the Church. This church does not belong to us--it does not belong to any one generation.

I remember years ago a child was walking home from a school that sat across the street from the church that I served at the time. Seeing me come out of the building he asked me if I owned the church. I told him that I did not. He then asked who owned the church. I paused for a moment as I considered his question and then answered honestly, “God does.” Satisfied he walked on home.

God owns the small “c” and big “C” church. We are mere stewards, temporary tenants. Nothing more. We do the best we can, living together and always striving to balance the “peace, unity, and purity” of the church. How we do this is another sermon for another day. But for now, suffice it to say the our first New Year’s Resolution will be to be like the Magi who sought the Christ Child to pay homage. May we strive to humble ourselves and acknowledge that Christ is Lord of all - our possessions, our treasure, and our very lives. May we not go a single day without asking God what we should do, that the Divine guide us in our thoughts and actions. And may we remember that we are nothing more than humble servants in the service of the King of kings.

To God be the glory. Amen.