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“Giving People”

Matthew 2:1-12

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who's 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, Herod inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it's 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 magi and learned from them the exact time when the star appeared.

Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you've 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, the magi offered the child 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.

Matthew 2:1-12

You thought you were getting it right.
You went on Amazon several weeks before Christmas.
You gave it real thought,
and picked out an expensive shirt.

But as they opened their gift,
you thought,
“What was I thinking?
What color is that?
Is it ochre?
Is ochre a color?

I bought a shirt for someone half their age.
How could I not see that?

Who would wear that shirt?

Maybe someone working in the yard,
on wash day.

Maybe someone who’s color blind.
Someone who got dressed in the dark.

How do I let them know that I paid a lot?

Why did I think this was a good idea?

This shirt is going into the special section of their
closet where they keep never-to-be worn clothes.

After the three-month-Christmas-gift cooling off
period, they’ll bring the shirt to the Thrift Store, who’ll give
it to the Salvation Army.

I *hope* someone will end up wearing the expensive shirt
I bought, but I can imagine a homeless person being offered
this shirt and saying to the volunteer, ‘You wouldn’t have
something in another color?’” (*this is a riff on a Garrison
Keillor monologue*).

One of the tough parts of Christmas is watching someone open your gift and seeing something *other* than elation on their face.

When we give a gift, we're saying something about who we they think they are.

When we give something to someone we don't know that well, we're more likely to give under-appreciated gifts.

We know what they mean when they say, "Oh! How interesting! Who would've thought?"

We know they're thinking: "What on earth have you done? Who do you think I am?"

According to one survey, 58% of recipients react negatively to their gifts. A University of Illinois report concluded after studying 147 "gift experiences" that "gifts are an extremely inefficient use of money and psychic energy" (Michelle Slatalla, *Time*).

According to a second study, "People value their own purchases 18 percent more than they value items they receive as gifts" (Miroslav Volk, "Foolish Gifts, *Christian Century*).

Some of our gifts will be given *again* next December. They'll collect dust until they're passed along to someone else who will not want them.

Today's gifts are tomorrow's stoop sales.

The story of the magi suggests we are part of a long tradition of bad gift giving.

It's hard to imagine wise people picking these gifts.

We enjoy singing *We Three Kings of Orient Are*, even though there weren't three, weren't kings, and weren't from the Orient.

We don't know much about the wise men, so we make stuff up.

Matthew calls them "magi"—
not "wise men" or "kings."

The word magi is the root from which we get the word magician.

A magus was a sorcerer, scientist,
and astrologer.

The gifts they bring suggest they did *not* spend a lot of time with children.

One early tradition is that there were *twelve* magi, but that made the nativity scene crowded, so since there are three gifts—shaky evidence though it is—we went with three.

With their star charts and whatever they saw,
the magi come to the conclusion that a new king has been born in Israel.

One legend is that the journey took thirty days.

They had a month to think about better gifts for a toddler.

One poet describes the magi's journey this way:

A cold wind whipped between the dunes,
breathing life into swarms of tiny sand crystals that bit like angry mites.

The wise men were grateful for their beards.

They had trekked many nights.

Fatigue weighed on their feet and on their spirits.

"Are we there yet?"

One complained, "This is sooo boring."

"My feet hurt," said the second wise man,

"This baby king better like my gift."

"Oh sure, no better gift for an infant boy than exotic

perfume.”

“Really?

You make fun of my present?

What even is ‘myrrh’?

Did you make that up?”

“Brethren!”

interjected the third wise man,

“Cease your squabble.

It matters not what we bring, it is this journey itself that is our most precious cargo...”

“But yeah,” he said,

“your gifts are both weird.

They’re *totally* going to love my gold.”

They *finally* arrive in Jerusalem

and start asking around,

“Where can we find the newborn King of the Jews?

We saw a *star* that signaled his birth.

We’ve come to worship him.”

When word gets to Herod, he gets nervous.

Herod is a *fake* king of the Jews,

put in power by the Romans.

He’s always afraid for his job.

He asks the reference librarians for help.

600 years earlier,

Isaiah described a pilgrimage of rich kings coming to Jerusalem on camels, bringing gold and frankincense.

The prophet Micah gave directions,

“It’s you, Bethlehem, from you will come the shepherd for God’s people.”

The scribes are *smart* enough to remember Micah, but not wise enough to look for the child themselves.

Herod tries to hoodwink the magi into coming back to tell him the child's location so that he can pay the child a visit, too,

"We kings have to stick together."

The magi set off.

The star appears again.

They throw the most famous baby shower ever.

The first wise man says,

"I've brought gold for the child."

Joseph isn't sure what to make of that.

The second wise man says,

"I've brought frankincense for the child."

Mary's confused.

The third wise man says,

"But wait there's myrrh!"

Scholars make a lot of the symbolism.

Gold represents royalty.

Frankincense is used for worship in the temple.

Myrrh is a perfume to anoint dead bodies.

The gifts that the magi give cost them plenty, but they *aren't* appropriate.

In the inflatable nativity scenes they sell at Target, three turbaned wise men look like they're bringing a jewelry box, a golden football, and a silver sausage.

The magi's visit lasts all of one verse.

We're not told what they think,

what they feel,

or if Mary trades the myrrh for diapers.

In any case, they set the gifts down, and go back to their old life.

Why didn't they bring better gifts?

For all their great wisdom,

they overlooked the *obvious* gift that the child would've

been genuinely pleased to have someday, the gift of themselves.

The writer of Psalm 72 described kings falling down before the Messiah who would care for the poor and needy.

Wouldn't it have been something if the magi had decided to give to the poor and needy?

The baby grows up and teaches a revolutionary ethic of generosity, especially to those who are marginalized.

Jesus gets into trouble for calling greedy people beyond their selfishness.

2000 years later, we're here in worship, in part, because we've heard God's invitation to generosity.

We're here, even if we don't *know* it's why we're here, because we want to give.

We've felt the pull of God's love to become people who give.

We're here to offer our gifts to God.

We kneel before the manger
to lay our songs of praise,
our two hours a week as a volunteer,
our conversations with those who are lonely—
gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The good news of this story is that God receives our gifts,
and teaches us to how to give,
because we *long* to give.

Our spirits hunger for generosity,
our souls for kindness,
our hearts for unselfishness.

We're hard-wired to give.

Studies consistently suggest that giving to others leads to greater happiness than spending on ourselves.

Giving time and money lowers blood pressure and boosts cardiovascular health (a study in the journal *Healthy Psychology*).

There's a biochemical explanation for the positive emotions associated with giving.

In a study published by the National Academy of Science, participants' brains were monitored by MRI scans while they made decisions about giving to charitable organizations. *Choosing* to give activates the part of the brain that produces good feelings and a sense of belonging.

Generosity contributes to our well-being.

God invites us to spend less money on ourselves, and more on those who need help.

God calls us to waste less time amusing ourselves and give more time to our family, friends, and strangers.

God helps us be the people who care enough to give better gifts, who love enough to give real gifts.

We think about what people need, what we would need if we were in their circumstances, how to make their lives better.

We give our attention.

We offer our empathy.

We teach our children that the best thing they can do with their lives is serve others.

Giving moves from the list of things we should do to the list of gifts that bring us joy.

We become the people who leave something thoughtful on a colleague's desk, send a book to a friend, show up with flowers for no reason except that they were beautiful and we wanted to share that beauty with someone else.

We give good gifts:
a firm handshake to a shaky soul,
a kind word to the lonely,
a warm smile to the disheartened,
a sincere concern for the troubled,
a feeling of compassion for the neglected,
a comforting thought for the bereaved,
a respect for the dignity of others,
a defense of the rights of individuals,
a word of hope to a weary soul.

We share the Lord's Supper
because we *long* to be God's people.

The bread and cup are the promise that the world we
know best,
the world of King Herod,
the world of selfishness,
gives way to the world of generosity.

At this table,
God invites us to be *generous* people.

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