

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
January 2, 2022 – 2 Christmas
Matthew 2:1-12 – The Wise Men
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On the church calendar, January 6th is when Christians celebrate Epiphany, the day following “the twelve days of Christmas” commemorated in that familiar song, the end of the Christmas season. The word “epiphany” means manifestation or appearance; a literal translation of the Greek would be “phenomenon to you.” At the church’s feast of the Epiphany, we focus on the wise men who traveled from the east, following a star over Bethlehem where they would find the infant Jesus, God made manifest in human form, and would present the child with kingly gifts.

We are familiar with the story of the wise men. As we see in our crèche, there are traditionally three men, and they are royalty. Matthew’s Gospel is the only one which includes an account of the wise men. And in this gospel we find little information about them. We don’t know that there were three men, only that there were three gifts. These men were not necessarily kings themselves. The gifts they brought were appropriate for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We do know that they were rich men because they were able to travel a long distance and because they had such treasure to give.

Let’s look at the gifts the wise men brought to Jesus. All three of the gifts are expensive. Gold. From ancient times to the present, gold has served as a symbol of value. It is rare. It is used to make attractive and impressive jewelry and other objects. It does not rust. Golden crowns symbolize kingship, so when the wise men offer gold to Jesus, they are acknowledging that he is a king.

Frankincense is a fragrant resin. In the Old Testament book of Exodus we learn that “pure frankincense” is part of the mixture of costly spices to be burned in the holy Tabernacle. It is to be used exclusively in worship, not as a personal perfume. Incense symbolizes prayer; Psalm 141, verse 2: “Let my prayer be set forth in your sight as incense.” Incense is offered to a divinity.

Myrrh is a pungent fragrant resin. Once again from the book of Exodus we learn that the sacred oil used for anointing was scented with myrrh, and Psalm 45 informs us that a mixture of myrrh and aloes was a kingly perfume. In John’s gospel we read that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped the body of Jesus in linen cloth containing a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. Myrrh symbolizes kingship and death.

The wise men’s gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh stand for “King, and God, and Sacrifice,” as we sang today in the hymn “We Three Kings of Orient are.” Matthew tells us, in this brief passage at the beginning of his account of the life of Jesus, that the infant whom the wise men came to adore is the divine king who will die on behalf of all people, Jews and gentiles alike. At his birth, gentiles from the east are drawn to him. And at the end of Matthew’s gospel, the risen Christ instructs his apostles, “Go ... and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The manifestation of God in Christ is for all people.

On Epiphany the church focuses on the wise men from the east who were led by a star to the infant Jesus, King and God and Sacrifice. The wise men brought the child gifts fit for such a king.

There is a very different quality to the gifts offered by Jesus' disciples – the men and women who knew Jesus intimately and who loved him and were loved by him – at Jesus' death. When Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea freely gave his tomb for Jesus' burial. Jesus was a man who in life and in death had no home. He had said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Joseph freely gave his own final resting place to his homeless Lord. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped the body of Jesus in linen cloth containing a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes – surely a wildly extravagant gift to honor the precious Lord they loved.

No one offered gold to the body of Jesus when he died. The corpse of a man needs no gold. But when Jesus had risen from the grave and the Holy Spirit had come among his followers, they did offer their gold, not to a corpse, but to the living Body of Christ, the women and men and children of the early church. We learn in the Book of Acts that "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44). For love of the Lord Jesus people gave their wealth for the members of Christ's body who were in need.

So here we are today, worshiping Christ our Lord. Jesus promised that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). So, by many different roads, we have all come to a place where Jesus may be found. Like the Wise Men, we bring our gifts and offerings. We offer our time to praise God, and we offer our prayer "as incense" to God. We offer our talents in the corporate worship of God. We offer gifts of money for the work of the church here and in the wider world. We offer this church as a place of welcome and safety and prayer, open to all.

By the world's calendar we have just begun a New Year, a time both to look back on the year that is past and to look ahead to the year to come. Making "resolutions" about behavior in the coming year is a custom which has been observed for centuries and is still popular. I wonder how we, as followers of Jesus, might make use of this custom. Not for something relatively unimportant, but for what we believe matters most. What if we resolved to more faithfully honor ourselves and others as children of God? What if we resolved to more faithfully use the gifts God has given us to the glory of God?

One of our beloved Christmas hymns is a setting of Christina Rossetti's poem "In the bleak midwinter." The last verse considers gifts fit for the Holy Child born in Bethlehem. "What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart."

I pray that as each of us walks with Jesus day by day and year by year, we will know him better and our love for him will grow. I pray that each of us will be filled by his Holy Spirit more and more, and that, for the sake of Christ and the world he came to save, we will become extravagant givers and ardent lovers who know the incomparable joy of the Lord, now and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.