

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
January 5, 2025 – A Service of Epiphany Lessons and Carols  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Tomorrow, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Epiphany, marks the end of the Christmas season. Today we rehearse, in scripture and in song, the account of the “wise men from the East” who have followed a star and arrived in Bethlehem where a child had been born who was to be the king of the Jews. Filled with joy, when they saw Jesus with Mary, “they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (Matthew 2:1-12). These gifts were gifts suitable to honor a king or a deity in the ancient world. Gold represented Jesus’ kingship. Frankincense was a symbol of his priestly role and deity. Myrrh prefigured his death and embalming. I think the kings represent the desire of all people who love Jesus to worship him and to offer him precious gifts. Their journey to find Jesus may also represent our spiritual journeys to seek Jesus.

The story of the Wise Men captured the imagination of an Italian-American composer, Gian Carlo Menotti. He wrote a one act opera based on the story called “Amahl and the Night Visitors,” which was first broadcast on television on Christmas Eve in 1951. It is a lovely piece frequently performed in the Christmas season. I’d like to share the story of Amahl with you.

Amahl is a crippled shepherd boy who lives with his mother, a poor widow. At the time of the story, they have nothing left and are faced with hunger and cold in an empty hut. Three Wise Men and their page, on their way to Bethlehem, stop at their hut and ask for shelter for the night. Amahl and his mother welcome them and, with help from their neighbors, entertain them as best they can. Everyone is amazed by the kings – their robes and the marvelous gifts they carry. When Amahl’s mother learns that the three kings are looking for a newborn baby and that the gifts are for him, she becomes bitter and envious. She cannot understand why at least some of these gifts couldn’t be given to her own child, who is poor, hungry, cold, and ill.

While the kings are sleeping, Amahl’s mother steals some of the gold from them and is caught by the page. The kings demand that she return the gold, but when they understand that she only wants it to feed her starving son, they forgive her. In a beautiful aria, King Melchior sings, “Oh, woman, you can keep the gold. The Child we seek doesn’t need our gold. On love, on love alone He will build His Kingdom. His pierced hand will hold no scepter. His haloed head will wear no crown. His might will not be built on your toil.”

Amahl’s mother returns the gold, touched by these words about the Christ Child, and wishes she could add a gift of her own. Little Amahl then impulsively says, “But Mother, let me send him my crutch. Who knows, he may need one, and this I made myself.” As he offers the Three Kings his crutch – his most precious possession – to give to the newborn king, Amahl is miraculously cured. He then travels with the Three Kings to Bethlehem to see the Christ Child and offer him his thanks.

Of course, this is a tale of imagination, not something we know happened. But like all good tales close to the spirit of their subject, this tale conveys truth. Truth about Christ and his kingship and his kingdom. Truth about love and the miraculous healing power of offering our love and our gifts to Christ. Truth about human need.

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of love, self-giving love. A kingdom not built on the toil of the poor, but a kingdom where the needs of the poor are met, the suffering of the poor relieved. The gifts we are called to give Christ the King are practical gifts offered not directly to him, but to the poor, the sick, the hungry and thirsty, all human beings who need compassion and assistance. Vulnerable people, children. This is the teaching of Jesus.

While Amahl's mother wrestles with her conscience before taking the King's gold, she sings, "All that gold! All that gold! I wonder if rich people know what to do with their gold! Do they know how a child could be fed? Do rich people know? Do they know that a house can be kept warm all day with burning logs? Do rich people know?" She goes on and sings, "Oh, what I could do for my child with that gold!"

I believe that we who have had the blessing to know the love and teachings of Jesus need to take this mother's words to heart. To hear her cry. To grow in compassion. And to know that when we offer our love, our hearts to God, that's only one part of our call and our vocation. The other part – not an "extra" but an essential part – is to offer our gifts – our time and talents, our money and belongings, our kindness – to other people in need. The more we grow in love, the more natural this will become.

This is not the way of the world. In many ways the world appears to be growing ever further away from the way of love. It is certainly a challenge to live in our time and place and be faithful to the Gospel. A challenge, yes, but one we are called to meet in whatever place and in whatever way God leads us. Always with the help of God and in Jesus' name. Amen.