

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has 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, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has 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 wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have 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, they offered him 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.

It's Never Too Late to Live Rev. Joel Kershaw January 6, 2008

Grace be yours, and peace, from Jesus Christ, our Lord.

I had a bit of a breakthrough recently. I was attending the Youth Leadership Conference with a group of teenagers from our church this past November. I was sitting in a row with three of the youth at the Snow Mountain Ranch YMCA of the Rockies in the chapel they have there. It's a lovely setting. We were wading through some legislation, voting on some youth leaders, et cetera, and a member of our group, a member of our confirmation class this year, leaned over to me and said, "The tables are covered in green because of the liturgical calendar, right? It's that time of year." Now, until that moment, I was convinced that my speech about the liturgical calendar and its associated colors would go the way of the Quadratic Equation. You remember that, don't you? x equals negative b , plus or minus the square root of b squared minus $4ac$ over $2a$? Neither did I. The Internet is a beautiful thing.

Now, I know that some of you have probably made a living using such things as the Quadratic Equation, and I am confident that it is about as useless to me as it ever was. I think I only ever used it to complete my homework, but I'm sure the same could be said of people who are interested in things like the liturgical calendar and the colors associated with it. It's only important for those who have to be in charge of such things. So it

warmed my heart when a youth that I was teaching, actually was paying attention during that speech. Now today is one of those special days in the life of the church. It is Epiphany, and for those keeping track, the color is white. Epiphany literally means the manifestation of the Lord. You might think of it as our way of marking the coming of the wise men to shower their gifts on the Christ child. While it can be nice to have a set theme for a particular Sunday, as a preacher, it also presents a challenge. Ministers all over the world and I take up this challenge today – the task of coming up with something new to say about something so familiar as the wise men and the gifts that they bring. Well, in thinking about the wise men and their gifts, coming from the East, I had a question. What on earth is a child going to do with gold, frankincense and myrrh?

If you're honest with yourself, I bet you've had that same question and just sort of relegated it to one of those Biblical mysteries that no one will ever understand. I have done that, too, I think, after much research. I much prefer the Herdmans' editorial to this particular story, where they bring the Christmas ham, instead of the gold, frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child. I love that book, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. I began to sift through the many writings on the subject, and found several ways of answering the question, "What on earth do these gifts mean?"

The first, of course, is tradition. The tradition of the church holds that the gold brought by the first wise man, presumably, being one of the most valuable metals, represents Jesus' royalty. Jesus is king, we heard that in our first hymn this morning. After all, they come looking for the child born King of the Jews, don't they, frightening Herod? The frankincense was a fragrant resin used in the performing of religious ceremonies by priests, and therefore represents Jesus' divinity. Now, the myrrh is another fragrant resin that can be used in the anointing of the dead, the embalming of bodies. If you read the lyrics of "We Three Kings" carefully, you'll see all three of those traditional interpretations represented.

Tradition is a funny thing. It can either provide a stability and framework for life, and in this case, faith, but it can also become a barrier to a deeper understanding, and is often both. We are pushed to sign up for tradition and never question it, to get on board or get out. There was a guy, probably knew the Quadratic Equation, many years ago, who came up with an innovative way of predicting the movement of the heavenly bodies. But he maintained, at least publicly, that this was simply a hypothetical theory, because the theory hinged on the assumption that the earth revolved around the sun, when conventional wisdom, and more importantly, church tradition of the time thought otherwise. Church tradition of the time trumped everything to that point, to the point another guy, a few years later, got in enough hot water over the same assumption that he was placed under house arrest by the Catholic church. Those were the days, weren't they, when the church could put you under house arrest? Galileo never left home again because of the traditions of the church. Of course this lesson, the lesson of the story of Galileo and his home confinement, was that he was confined for ultimately being right.

Tradition can be a tricky thing. Signing up for tradition without considering its merits gets us in trouble from time to time, so being dissatisfied with traditional explanations, I

dug a little deeper to find out what others might think about these gifts, these gifts of the Magi. It turns out that another way of looking at these gifts boils down to the value. These gifts had considerable value. Gold we understand, obviously, but the frankincense and myrrh were not native to Judea, and hard to produce, and like any hard-to-produce import, they were rare and expensive. This leads some to claim that the meaning of these gifts stops at their extraordinary value. These were simply expensive gifts fit for a king, and in the absence of any Biblical witness, some have even speculated that these gifts were then hocked to supply the money needed to escape to Egypt, and who ever said returning a gift was bad form, right?

This view of the Magis' gifts brings up an important question for me, a problem that I want you to consider. If we assume that these were nothing more than expensive gifts, fit for a king, I think we must conclude that the wise men who traveled so far to give their gifts to the Christ child didn't really understand who Jesus really was. It seems to me that the title "king" falls far short of describing Jesus. "King" is more fit for Herod, perhaps, in our story. Herod is portrayed as the power-hungry puppet of Rome, so afraid of losing power that he would order the death of children to keep it. Jesus is not a powerful political and military leader that everyone expected in their Messiah. That is the point of the Gospels. Everyone was expecting one thing and Jesus comes along and gives them something completely different, and our Gospel writers are left with trying to explain to us how "that's how we thought it was going to be all along," kind of like politicians.

Jesus is not set aside, lavished in riches, raised in a palace, born of a powerful ruler. Jesus is a poor kid, born to poor parents, in a small country town in Judea. These gifts of great value might have been fit for a king, but they lift up Jesus as something he is not. They establish an expectation of Jesus that is never fulfilled. Matthew might have intended them to point out Jesus' importance, that Jesus is so important that even non-Jews from out of town get how important he really was. But if these gifts were worthy of a king, they fall short of being worthy of Christ. They lift up Jesus within the framework of society, but fail to recognize that Jesus' life and teachings work to tear down that framework, so that the first are last and the last become first. Jesus himself never openly claims the title of king, even when questioned by Pilate on his way to the cross. Jesus spends his life with the people, eating with sinners, traveling with fishermen, teaching the crowds that God is truly with everyone, not just the elite, the rich and the powerful.

To make this point rather strongly for me, one of my professors at Boston University School of Theology, home of the big diploma, I'll add....are you all sick of that yet? We went to a busy stairwell, me and about thirty of my classmates, to look at a stained glass window of Christ reading from the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, and below our professor points out the caption. At the bottom of the window, it says, "God anointed me to preach good news." None of us caught it, thirty seminarians who hopefully had been paying attention in our classes, none of us caught it at all. And just as we were wondering what on earth we were all doing in the stairwell, my professor pulls out his Bible, and he opens it to Luke and he reads what the passage Jesus quotes really says, and that is, "God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." The maker of the window saw fit to leave off "to the poor," stopping in the middle of the

sentence. In our hurry to proclaim Jesus as king, we forget that Jesus was the first to descend from that title and live among the people, the rabble of the world.

Now, we probably all take an opportunity from time to time to represent ourselves as more significant than we are. We don't always follow in Jesus' humble footsteps. Putting Jesus on a high pedestal marked for a king elevates our status as Jesus' followers, doesn't it? If Jesus is so important he's a king, then we must be important for following him. Now, I have been known to embellish, from time to time. When I was a kid, I was a fan of, I'm still a fan of, genealogies, learning about who you are and where you came from, and my grandfather discovered something about our genealogy on my mother's side that I liked to share with people to sort of pump myself up when I was feeling a little down. And that was, I am related to Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States – I think most of us would agree, a pretty good guy. I am related to Abraham Lincoln. In our climate of political wrangling and presidential debates, you sharp-witted people will go right to the gut and say, "What do you mean by related?" What do you mean by related, because that whole statement, "I am related to Abraham Lincoln," hinges on what I mean by related. Well, as it turns out, my grandfather's last name was Todd, and he found out that his family had a young woman in it from Kentucky, who fled Kentucky, into the arms of an Illinois lawyer who eventually became President. I am loosely related to Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of president Abraham Lincoln. I usually left that part out, when I would tell people, as a kid.

Now, the Biblical writers, smart as they were, thought of this trick too, and worked diligently to place Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, home of David's family, and bored Biblical readers for generations with the genealogies linking Joseph to David. What Matthew and Luke's authors failed to remember is that, if we take the virgin birth seriously, Joseph isn't Jesus' father, so what difference does it make anyway? Thousands of years of copying and editing and we couldn't even get that straight. Now, despite efforts to link Jesus to this kingly status, we see in the Gospels a human being full of love and grace. Not a ruler, backed with power and military might. If these gifts were fit for a king, lifting Jesus above the rest, then they truly missed the point of Jesus.

One of the more intriguing theories about the meaning of these strange gifts, I found, relates to the meaning of the title "magi," which we heard translated as "wise man," that's the Greek magi. Strangely enough, "magi" cannot be translated in any way, shape, or form as "king," so "We Three Kings" is kind of a misnomer. But it can mean wise men, as we heard. It can also refer to astrologers and magicians. Now, that doesn't quite have the same connotation that we would have of astrologers and magicians today, you know, images of people in top hats pulling rabbits and that sort of thing. But they probably would have come from Persia, which is modern-day Iran and Iraq, and some scholars have noted that the gold, the frankincense and the myrrh would have been tools of the trade for astrologers and magicians from Persia. These people would have used such elements in their work as cultic leaders, religious officiators, if you will. And the thinking is that, if they were in fact tools of the trade, then they are presented to Christ as a way of symbolizing their conversion. Now, "conversion to what?" is the obvious

question, but nevertheless we might see it as a giving up of old ways, symbolic of a new beginning for these magi.

But what does that say about these wise men? There is no account of them studying the Hebrew scripture to learn of the ancient prophecies that are linked to Christ. There is not time spent with Jesus in his life and teachings, his death and his resurrection. There is just the presentation of gifts and the going home. If this is truly a conversion, it lacks the kind of follow-through that we might expect. I think that such a method of interpreting the story leads us to believe that God expects us to give up who we are, without questioning, without reasoning. If tradition expects us to sign up, and kingship calls us to lift up, then this way of interpreting the gifts implies that we must give up, give up who we are and what we know.

As you might suspect by now, I'm not very fond of this interpretation either. On the surface, we might be able to consider the idea. If we are really honest with ourselves, there are things that we do in our lives that don't quite have the cohesiveness we would like with God's vision of creation. You can fill in your favorite New Year's resolution here, I suppose. We all seem to fall short, trip up, let down the God that calls us to love each other. But how are we to know what parts of our lives are truly keeping us from fulfilling our potential as Christians? How are we to know what we are to leave behind to follow Christ, and what parts of our being are truly unique and vital to the diversity of all creation?

If we consider each of us to be a child of God, created in the image of God, then there must be something of value in the diversity we see in each other and throughout creation. We cannot all be the same, and therefore it stands to reason that people are different for a reason. I recently got an e-mail (e-mail is wonderfully anonymous) but I got an e-mail from a person who has been attending our church recently. The e-mail detailed a life struggling to deal with Christianity claiming a God of love, when they felt no love from the followers of God. This person had been confronted by people telling them that they must change who they are, in order to be acceptable to God. Imagine believing that God created you to be who are, and having fellow Christians claim that you must change who you are, to be a good follower of God. This person is gay. Now, that may make some of you uncomfortable. It might make some of you struggle, but they're gay. And it has been a struggle for them to keep faith in God while staying grounded in who they are and who they feel God has created them to be. Does God call them to give up who they are, what they know? Did God call Galileo to give up on what he knew to be true because Christians of his time refused to see it differently? Did God call Abraham Lincoln to back away from emancipation because half of his country seceded from the Union? Did God call on Martin Luther King Jr. to give up on his dream of racial equality because God-fearing Christians opposed desegregation? Does God call you and me to give up who we are?

I believe that the real message of this story of the wise men from the East is not about what is given, but it is instead a call to give. We are not to "sign up or get out." We are not to lift up, but are instead to embrace. We are not to give up on who we are, but we are

called to give away who we are, so that God might be seen through our living and through our loving. It is never too late to start living a life that shows God's love, and we do that by harnessing our own unique and special being, taking that being and challenging the comfortable, outmoded traditions that hold us back at times. Taking that being and connecting with the love of God shown through Christ, so that Jesus is not a king set apart, but a friend and a fellow human connecting us with God and each other. Taking that unique being and owning it, so that the world might know God in the endless diversity of creation, rather than allow that diversity to become a way of separating us from each other, and ultimately separating us from God.

In Mississippi a couple summers ago, 2006, our youth went on a mission trip, you might remember. We stayed in a church there in Biloxi, Mississippi, on the coast, and there were four groups staying there. There were three youth groups and one group of adults. Now, among the group of adults was an older gentleman we found out was in his eighties. This gentleman was a carpenter, and we learned he had retired several times before he made it to Biloxi. While there, he was using his skills as a carpenter, being who he was, to help other people rebuild their homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Undoubtedly, he came home and went right to sleep as soon as he got off the work site, but he worked just as hard as the sixteen-year-olds did in that hot July Mississippi sun. He owned who he was. He knew what he could do to help, and he did it, and he wasn't about to let his age get in the way. He knew who he was, and we knew God better because we knew him. That is our hope. In the end, I believe we give who we are that others might see God behind who we are, and know God better. That is the gift of God to the whole world, that we might together, in all our diversity, despite all our differences, embody the love we know in a child from Nazereth. The gifts of the magi might be pointing to tradition, or perhaps they are fit for a king, or maybe they are a symbol of a new commitment, but I believe Epiphany is calling us to give ourselves. To give ourselves, that we might know God better in the uniqueness of all our beings. Amen