

“Sharing Our Gifts”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, January 1, 2017
Epiphany Sunday—First Sunday after Christmas Day

Readings from scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

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. Then 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.

Matthew 2:1-12

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from the prophet and the Gospel, and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. And let that holy word do its work in our hearts, our minds and our souls. Let that word shape our self-understanding. Let that word guide our hearts and minds. Let that word challenge our beliefs and understandings and let that word lead us out into service, in order that we might carry on the ministry and mission of Christ in this world. We ask all of these things in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I don't know about you, but when I hear the story in the Gospel of Matthew, I have all the familiar songs and images—We Three Kings of Orient Are—that kind of play in my head. But it's stunning that something was written so long ago—millennia ago—still seems to touch the current situation that the Middle East finds itself in—tensions between countries and peoples. In the story in the Gospel of Matthew, we have Persian astrologers, possibly Syrians or maybe Arabs, illegal aliens in Judea, heading into Jerusalem with a profound conviction that they know that something political and religious is going on. It's during the time of Roman occupation and these strangers from an alien land come into Judea to find the King of the Jews, the one that the Jewish people have been waiting for. When they enter Jerusalem they encounter a paranoid king, empowered by Caesar in Rome, to watch over and control the people of Judea, to dictate how they live and what they do and to make sure that they pay their taxes. A king who can't tolerate, like all kings, any challenge to his power, and so he needs to destroy those who he sees as a threat. The tensions of the Bible story seem to touch the tensions that the Middle East and much of the world continue to face today. What do we do with strangers who enter in and challenge power? How are we to recognize the presence of the divine or the holy? What is it that we as individuals who seem unable to effect systems or kingdoms—what is it that we are supposed to do?

The phrase that echoes throughout the Gospel story is the phrase, “they came to pay him homage, pay him homage, pay him homage”. The people from the East first show up and say this is why they've come. Herod says, “If you find him, let me know because I want to go and do that as well.” And then upon finding the child, the people from the East kneel down, prostrating themselves before the King, opening their chests and they offer their gifts. The invitation for us is to ask ourselves in this ancient custom that no longer really makes sense to us, who or what do we bow down to? Who is our King? And if we are being invited to bow down before that King and offer gifts that are befitting a royal person in our life or a royal idea, who is that for us? And how do we do that? And is it faithful? Are we paying homage to Jesus Christ as Christians? Or in honesty as we begin this new year, do we realize that maybe we are paying homage to self-interest or self-security? Maybe we are paying homage to fear and worry. Or maybe we are paying homage to something else. As we begin this new year, it's important for us to think about what is it that we put in that place of honor and respect? Is it the child, the Christ child?

New Year's and New Year's Eve, last night and today, and really probably for the week ahead is often a time when each of us in our own way make resolutions, when we try to determine how is it that we are to live? Some of us write that we want to lose weight, or get fit, or be nicer, or read a particular number of books, or do certain acts of charity. On and on these lists tend to go. If you're like me, most of these lists last about a week and then you are done. New Year's resolutions behind us and now the habits of life take over. So it is in this idea of setting a New Year's resolution before us, that I have asked this question of what is it that we bow down to in worship? What is it that we lay our gifts before?

As I contemplated preaching about New Year's resolutions and thinking about them in my own life, I realize that I have been a bit distracted. On Wednesday I have the privilege of boarding a plane and flying to San Francisco in order to spend a week in silence with the Benedictine monks in Big Sur on the California coast. I have been thinking about the little I know about the Benedictine way of life in anticipation of this continuing event. What I know is that they have a phrase, *ora et labora*, that is the center of their existence as a people of God—prayer and work. It is the central rhythm of the Benedictine way of ordering their communal life. Several times throughout the day the monks will gather in silence to offer prayer, to have the Psalms read together or by someone else, and then after that time of prayer, they will go out to do their work for a moment—whether it's as a gardner, or as a cook, some might be teachers or nurses, some are artists, scholars—whatever their work is, they engage in that work only after they have spent time in prayer. Benedict also says in his rule that we should, all people, especially Benedictines, welcome everyone as we would welcome Christ. Chapter 53 of the Rule of Benedict reads: *Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for he is going to say, 'I came as a guest and you received me.'*

In this celebration of Christmas where we welcome the Christ child, the rule of Benedict invites us to think about where is the presence of that child in our world today? And what Benedict says is that child is present in each of us and that our invitation as Christians is to see that Child and welcome that Child and respond to each other as if you are Jesus Christ before us or before me. Just as the Magi came and bowed down before the child and offered their gifts before going home by another way, the Benedictine idea is that we find Christ in all who arrive before us, members of our family, our friends, visitors to our church, persons in need, the hungry, the sick, the homeless—whoever it is, that is where Christ is present in our world. And so the question becomes, like the Magi who gave their gifts, what gifts are we going to pour out before the Christ we meet in the persons who are before us.

On Christmas Eve I preached on what I felt were some of the gifts this congregation has to offer in regards to pouring out things before the feet of Christ and the others who show up as visitors, friends or even those in need. I talked about the gift of sanctuary that we share together, how for one hour each

week we spend time as a holy family, gathered in a safe place that is set apart from the demands of the world—set apart from every demand of the world—in order that we might be attentive to the Holy Spirit, to God, to the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all of life, that we might pay attention to what God is doing in our world, in our life, in our community. The gift that we offer is this time apart, holy time.

The second gift that I named was that we offer a welcoming community. We sing and say time and again that all are welcome here. We are a place where people can come and belong and be recognized for who they are, to be accepted, encouraged, loved and supported no matter what.

The third thing is that we offer an experience of beauty. Often there are times when I am preaching when I think there is a voice in my head that I hear that says simply, *shut up and turn around*. What is it that the windows are preaching this day to you? There are times when the organ is being played when I feel my insides kind of moving in a different way, my soul just resting on that still place of refreshment and renewal. I think about the solos that we hear or the bells, the preaching, all the liturgy that we do. We get to step into an experience of God's glory and my prayer is always that that gift of beauty will change people's lives. And then I preach that each of us has a gift, that we affirm that each of us no matter what is gifted by the Spirit to contribute to the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and to the robust family of faith that we are. We encourage those gifts, we support those gifts, we nurture those gifts, but most importantly we invite you share those gifts. We are a gifted congregation. Because of the blessings of God, we are able to share those gifts with our neighbors in need.

As I've said before and I'll say 100 or 1,000 times again, so much of what you give is given in private. It's given when Karen and I or a Stephen Minister or a hospital visitor shows up in someone's life and that person is desperately in need to know that they are loved and cared for and that God is with them. You show up. You may not ever know it. I pray to God that you never need it, but sometimes this is how God works through all of us together.

This past fall the session of our church was led through a process where we developed a new mission statement. It took several months to craft words that capture the essence of who we thought we are at this moment in our common life. The statement that was approved by session in December reads as follows:

“We are called to be a welcoming, supportive community whose inspiring worship of God encourages everyone to deepen their faith and to respond to the needs of the world with the compassion of Christ.”

Each word is a rich capturing of so much more than what that one word says. We are a welcoming and supportive community, as I mentioned, making calls to those in need and welcoming anyone. We have inspiring worship that we pay attention to as a congregation and commit innumerable hours and dollars and imagination and resources to figure out how to do worship better and richer and more inclusive. The mission statement that we have is a picture of who we are at this stage in our journey. And as I spent the week thinking about it and really praying through it, I realized that it captures some of the gifts I mentioned on Christmas Eve and a few others. I just want to conclude my sermon by sharing the gifts that I think our mission statement names for us—gifts that we can, with joy, pour forth before those that we see in our lives, gifts that we can pour forth before the Christ in the other.

The first gift that we have to offer in the year ahead is a commitment to welcome the stranger and friend alike, and to support them in their time of need. New members who join our church, the visitors who decide that they want to be part of First Pres, often comment how important it has been for them to have a welcoming encounter during their first couple of visits. This is a gift that enriches our

common life and I believe it's an important beginning for us to think about as we start this new year.

The second gift is that we have worship that inspires the heart and stirs the soul. The intention of our worship is to encourage everyone to deepen their faith, to have an experience of the Holy, to be touched somehow by the comforting or challenging hand of God. It's a gift that we can share together and offer to everyone.

The third gift is an abiding belief that the Holy Spirit continues in each of us to cultivate our spiritual gifts in order that together, and I want to underline that word together, we can meet the needs of our neighbors in need within our congregation, our community or the world with compassion and with justice.

Three gifts that we have, not gold, not frankincense, and not myrrh: A commitment to welcome the stranger and friend, worship that inspires the heart and soul, and an abiding belief that each of us has a gift to share to make the world a better place. I hope that in the year ahead, each of us can share those gifts in the way and peace of Jesus Christ. Happy New Year! Amen.