

From the Pulpit of Knox Presbyterian Church

1 Epiphany

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STAR GIFTS – WORDS TO PONDER ALL YEAR LONG

Galatians 5:16-25

Matthew 2:1-12

Hearing again the story of the Magi and singing again, “We Three Kings” brings to mind our most recent Christmas Pageant. Certainly, Ian, in the role of baby Jesus was a delight, smiling all the while. And Allan in the role of Isaiah was stately and wise. What touched me the most was the pageantry of the Magi played by Ricky, Aris, and Cami. When Ricky beautifully read his lines about presenting a gift to the Child of Bethlehem, gold to be exact, a treasure fit for the king, and then slowly kneeled and said with such feeling and authenticity, “In my heart I crown him my king forever,” well, my heart melted and my eyes filled with tears.

There is something mystical and magical about the story of the Magi. They appear suddenly in Jerusalem at Herod’s court inquiring about the birth of the “King of the Jews”. They are described in Matthew’s text as “wise men” or “Magi”, the Greek word is *magos*, meaning a wise man and priest, who was an expert in astrology, who studied the stars, and interpreted dreams. Even though we sing “We three kings of Orient are”, we’re pretty sure that they weren’t kings nor were there necessarily three of them. The text says they come from “the east”, the direction from which the sun rises, but exactly where in the east is not known – perhaps Persia or Babylon or Arabia. The sense is that these men of wisdom come from an exotic, far away land. Seeking a newborn king, they say to Herod, “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

The star was some luminous body visible in the night sky. It could have been a supernova or a comet or a conjunction of planets like Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars that gave out brilliant light for several weeks, months, even years. But there is no historical evidence of any of these celestial events at the time of Jesus’ birth. So what the Star of Bethlehem exactly was is unknown. And yet it inspired the Magi’s journey and their quest to worship a new king and that star continues to capture our imagination. It seems that the Magi had seen the star “at it’s rising” and had come to Jerusalem, since that is where they expected to find a newborn King of the Jews. But then the star, which seems to have disappeared for a while, reappears and goes ahead of them, leading them elsewhere. So their journey continues until the star stops over the place where the child was.

Given all the Christmas pageants we've ever viewed or participated in through the years, our assumption is that the star stopped over a small stable in Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth and that the Magi crowded into the nativity scene with shepherds and angels. But this certainly wasn't the case. In verse 11 we read "On coming to the house, the Magi saw the child..." It is more likely that two years after Jesus' birth the Holy Family has left the stable and is now living in a house. The arrival of such exotic travelers at their home must have set Mary and Joseph's hearts to racing. We're not told the details of this encounter. What we do know is that the Magi's long journey and quest has ended. When they see the child, now a toddler, they bow and worship him. Imagine, elderly men, finely dressed, prostrating themselves on a dirt floor before a small child. They had seen a magnificent star. It had guided them to this very house and to this very child – the Messiah, the King of the Jews.

Now whenever foreign dignitaries would appear before a great king they would bring gifts as a sign of respect, reverence and honor. So the Magi opened their treasure chests and presented the child with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. The gifts don't seem very appropriate for a child. Maybe it's more that the gifts are symbolic – gold for Christ's royalty, frankincense for his deity, and myrrh for his humanity and thus ultimate burial. More than symbols though, the Magi's gifts characterize the best the Magi had to offer to the Gift of Gifts. Their precious and extravagant gifts gave testimony to the sincerity of their hearts. On a more practical level the gifts were what was needed. They were probably gradually sold to provide for the Holy Family during three years of exile in Egypt where they fled to escape Herod's wrath.

The story of the Magi and the star ends with a dream, warning them not to go back to Herod. So they returned to their country by another route. Having presented their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, their treasure chests are now empty. But I would like to suggest that their hearts are now full of the gifts they received by being in the presence of the Christ Child, the ultimate Gift and the Giver of Gifts. As they returned to their country by another route they carried these gifts in their hearts and pondered them in their continuing journey of faith.

We have attributed the tradition of gift-giving at Christmas to the Magi and rightly so. Today though, in commemoration of the Magi I would like to launch a new tradition here at Knox. Just as the Magi, I believe, received gifts of love joy, peace and much more from the Christ Child, I would like you to receive gifts this morning.

This congregation is filled with compassionate people who over the years have spent countless hours giving of your time and energy and resources to the work of Christ's church. You are good at being busy and "doing" for God. Today though represents a change in our routine. Instead of first being asked to give, I will be inviting you to receive. You are being offering the opportunity to "be still" in the presence of God and receive God's gifts. I am calling them "star gifts."

These "star gifts" are God's gifts to us in Christ. They are the attitudes, characteristics that God wants to nurture in our lives. A good example of "star gifts" is found in Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians, although here they are called "fruits of the Spirit." When we fully receive the gift of Christ and live and our guided by his Spirit, then things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are manifested in our lives.

The "star gift" I offer each of you this morning is simply a heavy piece of paper with a bright blue star and a word printed on it. I've created about 100 "star gifts", each with their own word – words like the list of the "fruits of the Spirit" that I just read, and other words like hope, praise, harmony, hospitality, prayer, grace, courage, forgiveness, and many more.

In just a moment I will pass out these star gifts with the same offering plates that we will then use later to gather up your tithes, gifts, and pledges. This is always the order of things in God's realm – God always gives first, we receive and then are invited to respond to God's abundant generosity with the offering of our lives and gifts to the work of Christ.

Now I could just pass out the star gifts having decided in advance what star gift I believed each of you most needed. But that would mean I would be playing God. This gift receiving experience is meant to be serendipitous and Spirit inspired. So when the star gifts are passed around in the offering plates and the plate comes to you, offer a quick prayer for the star gift that God most wants to give you, prepare to receive something special, and then without looking take one of the stars. So let us be still in the presence of God and receive God's gifts. (Circulate the offering plates.)

The "star gift" you received may not be what you expected or believe you need to nurture in your life. Like any other gift, you can either receive it with joy or discard it. Rather than stuffing into a pocket or jamming it in the bottom of your purse, I would encourage you to take it home.

Post your “star gift” on your bathroom mirror or refrigerator door or next to your commuter screen. Or add string or ribbon and hang it from the mirror in your car or somewhere in your home where you will see it every day – perhaps near the front door where it will be seen as you and others depart and leave your home. Then begin to ponder in your hearts the word on your star. Allow God to speak to you through this word. What does God want you to learn, to discover, to through the gift of this one word? What does God want to nurture, strengthen in your life and relationships as indicted by this word, this attitude, this attribute? What new idea or treasured wisdom does God want to ignite or re-ignite in you through pondering this word – this “star gift”? With the help of this word, this star gift, where might God be calling you to shine this year? As you ponder the star, let it be a clear and tangible sign of God’s presence in your life.

By displaying or hanging your “star gift” where you can see it every day, I am inviting you to ponder your gift, your word all year long. I hope when I visit in your home I will notice your “star gift” adorned somewhere. I hope I will learn from you in the coming weeks, months how timely or challenging your word is, and how through this simple experience God is working in your life. I also hope that some of you throughout the year will share about your star gifts with your Knox family. How wonderful it would be if on a hot and bright summer Sunday, someone will remind us of this cold January Sunday and how a star gift has bolstered and encouraged them. In that way these star gifts are truly gifts that keep on giving, even long after this Epiphany season is over.

Friends, the Magi followed a star to Bethlehem where they found the Christ Child and worshiped him. In awe and reverence they presented their gifts to him and were blessed in return with gifts galore, including all the gifts you hold in your hands at this moment. Let us hold high our stars. Now prayerfully repeat after me: “Gracious God, may these star gifts / delight our hearts / nurture our souls / strengthen our faith / fill us with joy and peace / all in testimony to the Gift of Gifts, Christ our Lord / Amen.

NOTE: Inspired by “Star Gifts: Words to Ponder All Year Long” by Susan J. Foster, *Reformed Worship*, September 2009, Number 93, pp. 36-39.

