

“The Gifts of the Magi”

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Hos. 11:1-9

Matt. 2:7-15

‘When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

Hos. 11:1b

Let us pray... O God,

Help us remember the important role mentors play in a person’s life
and by saving a child we save us all.

Amen

We began the Advent season with the journey of the Magi
and now, we conclude with the achievement of their quest
to find the Christ child.

By the time the Magi arrived in Bethlehem,
the little family of Joseph & Mary and their newborn baby
had found lodging in a house
thanks to someone’s kindness.

Perhaps they stayed at the inn after the census crowd had moved on;
or they stayed with someone whom the innkeeper recommended;
or the family of one of those shepherds
who came looking for the baby in the manger,
or the family who owned the flock cared for by the shepherds;
or the home of one of the curious people
who happened to passing by on the street
and heard all the commotion about a newborn baby
on that strange and beautiful night.

Despite their plight somebody came through to help Jesus’ family.
That is a gift that is born out of necessity.

And when the Magi, or wise men, finally found
the place where they were staying, they went in
and when they saw the baby,
knelt down in thanksgiving that the vision had been fulfilled.
But also reverence for someone else’s Messiah
whom they honored as their own.

Now, there were no Muslims yet, like there were no Christians,
but the religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism,
and Zoroastrianism were all in full flower by that time.

Willard, p.2

If the Magi came from the Orient, they were likely members
of any one of these religions, yet they didn't come
to promote their beliefs.

They just wanted to bear witness to something great and good
unfolding for all humanity.

And isn't that something you might expect of someone
from the United Church of Christ!

That's a gift these days – to appreciate others' point of view
and find common ground.

Then the wise men brought out their presents to give to the child –
gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh
which are symbolic of Jesus' life and mission.

Gold is about wealth and power like that of a king in this world
and this acknowledges Jesus' kingly heritage as both
Son of God and Son of David.

Frankincense, or olibanum, is an aromatic resin that,
when it is burned, gives off an aroma and smoke
used in worship to signify prayers lifted up to heaven –
and this anticipates Jesus' priestly role and spiritual discipline
in expressing his love for God.

Myrrh is a form of healing balm, but also an ingredient used
in Egyptian mummification –
and this reminds us of Jesus' confrontation with death
that will lead to eternal life.

They celebrated the potential and promise
of who this child could become and that's a gift.

When the Magi found the baby
they accomplished the goal of their journey –
in which they were given an opportunity to see
the manifestation of God with us.

Another word for this is 'epiphany'
which celebrates the appearance of Christ to humanity.

In early Christian art, the Good Shepherd was
one of the earliest images of Christ meant to be symbolic
of his character as an adult – and not as a portrait.

The first image intended to be a portrait of Jesus himself
was as a baby usually shown with Mary his mother.

That was the gift to the Magi themselves and to us.

Willard, p.3

A picture of Christ as a baby represents how
God participated in our human condition
by ‘coming into the world the usual way’
and this helps us see how life is already holy and good.
And that is a gift to us all.

The Magi returned to their homeland by a new way
avoiding Herod the tyrant, but also bringing a ‘new way’
back with them –
the way of loving-kindness, generosity, religious tolerance,
forgiveness, thanksgiving-ness, and mutual respect.
And they returned to their lands rich in experience and wiser wise men
for having listened to their dreams and following them to see
how God was still at work in their time.

And that is the Magi’s greatest gift to us –
to call forth out of our imaginations, the possibilities for how
we can still go on quests of faith,
and then, share our gifts as adventures of the Spirit
to encourage others, especially young people,
to do the same.

And at journey’s end, find ourselves in that Beloved Community
of God’s Kingdom come, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Amen

Our Jewish Testament lesson today

is from Hosea 11:1-9.

Hosea was a prophet of the northern kingdom

and he describes God's relationship with Israel

*as being like that of a parent with a young child –
a struggle at times, but whose love is unfailing..*

11:1 When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

² The more I called them, the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my* arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.

⁵ They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

⁶ The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests,
and devours because of their schemes.

⁷ My people are bent on turning away from me.

To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

⁸ How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender.

⁹ I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst,

and I will not come in wrath.

Matt. 2:7-15

2:7 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.'

⁹When 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.

¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,
they were overwhelmed with joy.

¹¹On 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.

¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they left for their own country by another road.

¹³ Now after they had left,
an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,
'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt,
and remain there until I tell you;
for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'

¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night,
and went to Egypt,

¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod.

This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord
through the prophet,

'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Where did Christmas gift giving come from? If we go back to the first Christmas story when God sent Jesus to earth, we recall that Jesus was given three gifts by the three wise men or Magi, which serve as the inspiration for all our Christmas gift giving today.

The Magi presented Jesus with gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts were very prophetic for they spoke of our Lord's offices of King, Priest, and Savior.

GOLD: This carries obvious significance. It's precious and worthy across all cultures and times. It's a gift fit for royalty. It says to the Christ child, You will be a King

FRANKINCENSE: The name for this resin likely comes from incense of Franks since it was reintroduced to Europe by Frankish Crusaders. Although it is better known as frankincense" to westerners the resin is also known as olibanum, which is derived from the Arabic al-lub ("the milk") a reference to the milky sap tapped from the Boswellia tree. Frankincense has been touted for its medicinal and soothing properties. Herbalists say it is calming, restorative, gently clarifying, and meditative. Frankincense oil is thought to have stimulating, toning, and warming properties. The ancient world used it for treating depression. We recognize the word incense in its name. Ancient people burned frankincense, believing it to carry their prayers to heaven. Its use as incense illustrates His role as our Priest.

MYRRH: This is perhaps the most mysterious of the Gifts. It is a resin produced by a small, tough, scraggly tree that grows in semi-desert regions of North Africa and the Red Sea. Myrrh is an Arabic word for bitter, and it is considered a wound healer because of its strong antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. Calling it mo yao, the Chinese used it for centuries to treat wounds, bruises and bleeding and to relieve painful swelling.

The Egyptians made it famous in Biblical times, having acquired myrrh about the fifteenth century B.C. from Africa where cammiphora trees were abundant. It was used in incense, perfumes and holy ointments and also medicinally as recorded in the Ebers Papyrus. But its most notable use to them was that of an embalming material, used in Egyptian mummies. As an embalming ointment it signified that He was born to Die for the world. In fact, Myrrh was one of the burial spices of Jesus (John 19:39).

<http://www.magi-gifts.com/significance.html>