

“Gifts” (Matthew 2:1–12)(12.25.22) CHRISTMAS DAY

Matthew 2:1–12 (NIV84) *The Visit of the Magi*

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

LET US PRAY

INTRODUCTION:

There are all kinds of gifts. As I share some of my gift experiences, maybe they will remind you of something in your life. Our memories can be good or they can be bad but they all help form us into who we are today. As Christ followers, we hold fast to the promise of Romans 8:28 (NIV84) And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

BODY:

My most vivid memory of a gift as a young child is not a good one. I share it not to dampen the joy of

the season, but to speak to the darkness of this world. My parents had recently divorced and things were pretty unsettled. My younger sister and brother and I had been reunited at my paternal grandfather's house the summer before. I was six years old and it was Christmas.

My grandfather gave me coal for Christmas and it was no joke. I had been bad he said. This was from a man who was living with his mistress and her three children. This was from a man who locked my little brother in a closet as punishment for wetting his pants.

Four years later, a lot had happened. My mother remarried and our step-father adopted us. One of our favorite activities was to go sledding together on a big hill a short drive from our apartment. It was great fun and exhilarating with lots of laughing.

That Christmas my mom and adopted dad gave me my own toboggan. I had to fake being happy and I should have been happy with this excellent gift. But, I had snooped around before Christmas and saw it in their closet. I felt so guilty and that maybe I didn't deserve it now. Then I felt guilty for not being honest about it.

For Father's Day in 2020, my older son, Joshua, gave me a gift that keeps on giving. No, it wasn't a

membership in the Jelly of the Month Club. He gave me a beautiful baritone ukulele. Learning something new and being able to sing along has given me countless hours of joy. I have thanked him on multiple occasions for this gift.

The next gift was just this past Friday. It is not a normal type of gift in the conventional sense, but as I mature, I am able to see gifts from a different perspective. On Friday, we had that cold front come through. In our neighborhood, it came with very high winds. It was a little scary. It knocked down a tree in our yard. That tree fell on the power line to house and ripped it down to the ground. The storm also blew my neighbor's tree over, but it was being held up by another tree in our yard. As the wind was still strong, I was afraid the pressure of supporting the neighbor's tree would cause them to fall on our house.

Are you confused as to how I perceived a gift in this? To start with, we never lost electricity to our house. When I called the Atlantic City Electric emergency number, I was surprised and concerned that he didn't know that Absecon was in New Jersey. But, about 10 minutes later, a man from Mays Landing called me to say they had someone on the way. Fifteen minutes later, there was an Atlantic City Electric truck there to assess the situation. The worker told me that there was a

repair crew working on a house with the same problem one street away. An hour later four trucks and six men showed up. They reinstalled and secured the power line in short order.

I had never met this particular neighbor before. Meeting under such circumstances might not be favorable. When I went up the front walk, I saw his flagpole had been blown down too. His name is Scott and he had no idea his tree had come out of the ground. He was very cordial and concerned. Immediately, he started working on getting a tree crew there to take the tree all the way down.

After dinner, Carol and I were watching one of my favorite movies, "It's a Wonderful Life." As we watched, the tree crew showed up. It was dark and still windy. We could hear the trucks, chainsaws, and one of those wood grinders. After the movie, I went out to see. The crew was gone as was Scott's tree and our fallen tree. We could go to bed not worrying about our house being struck and damaged.

It was a dark world when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That is why the Apostle John opens his gospel with the proclamation that Jesus is the light of the world and in that light is life. Jesus himself claimed that title: I am the light of the world. It was dark because it was a pagan world. It was

dark because Israel was occupied by Roman Legions. It was dark because of oppression and violence. Next Sunday, we will explore that in more depth.

In the account of Magi from the east we have many gifts presented. We have the gift of scripture. When the Magi asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" what happened? The chief priests and teachers knew where to find the answer. They looked in the scriptures. The ruler and shepherd of God's people would be born in Bethlehem. When we want to know about Jesus, the place to start looking is in the holy scriptures.

You would have thought that King Herod, the priests, the scribes, and many people from Jerusalem would have gone with the Magi. No mention is made to suggest that response. Instead, King Herod just told them come back and let me know so I can go worship him. This was not true. Too many people talk their religion but don't live it.

The guiding star was a gift. God often will guide us if we are just obedient to follow the light. Our New International Translation says the Magi were overjoyed to see the star stopped where the child was. I don't think that quite captures their feeling.

Some translations say they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; or were overwhelmed with joy; or rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

The first thing they did was bow down and worship baby Jesus. To worship anything but God is sin, but this baby was God in the flesh. Most everyone knows about the gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. Did you catch that these were referred to as treasures? Most translations get more specific about the incense and call it frankincense.

Let's examine that gift first. Some scholars see it as symbolic of Jesus' priestly ministry. Other scholars say it points to Jesus' divinity. They argue that from Exodus 30:34–38 (NIV84) *Incense*

³⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take fragrant spices—gum resin, onycha and galbanum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts,³⁵ and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred.³⁶ Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you.³⁷ Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; **consider it holy to the Lord.**³⁸ Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people."

Both could be correct: pointing to Jesus' role as priest, one who intercedes with God on behalf of the people AND being God himself - Jesus in His humanity and in His divinity.

Myrr might be considered somewhat of a morbid gift. It points to the sacrificial death of Jesus. John 19:38-40 (NIV84) *The Burial of Jesus*

³⁸ Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away.³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.⁴⁰ Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

It is not hard to see that gold is a great treasure. Gold is given to kings. Kings wear crowns of gold. It is valuable. It is beautiful and shining. Gold is universally recognized as wealth across the globe and across the centuries. Interestingly the Holy City of heaven is described in Revelation 21:21 (NIV84) The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. **The great street of**

the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass. Even gold is better in heaven.

Our heavenly Father is so good and so generous. James tells us James 1:17 (NIV84) Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. We receive spiritual gifts; we receive material gifts; we receive our daily bread; we receive forgiveness. God IS the gift that keeps on giving because God gives Himself to us.

Romans 6:23 (NIV84) For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is **eternal life in Christ** Jesus our Lord.

John 4:10 (NIV84) Jesus answered her [the Samaritan woman at the well], "If you knew **the gift of God** and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Ephesians 2:8 (NIV84) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is **the gift of God**—

Romans 5:15–17 (NIV84)

¹⁵ But the **gift** is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how

much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!¹⁶ Again, the **gift** of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of **the gift of righteousness** reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Jesus promises a most precious gift in Acts 1:4-5 (NIV84)⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but **wait for the gift** my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Of course, the Holy Spirit is God the Holy Spirit. God continues to give of Himself. Christian followers of Jesus are the tabernacle of God – a dwelling place of God. Oh what a wonderful gift.

CONCLUSION:

Probably the best gift we can give is our presence. This year Carol and I gifted our oldest grandson and his parents with his presence back here for

Christmas. Nate is going to a school out in Laramie, Wyoming. With two kids in college, medical bills, and a major home repair, there wasn't enough money for Nate to come home for Christmas. So, our gift to them was to pay for his trip home so that we could all enjoy his presence and he could be with family.

Our heavenly Father modeled this for us. He sent his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be God with us. While Laramie is a long way from here, Jesus came down from heaven to that meager manger in a backwater place of the Roman Empire. The angel Gabriel said he would be called Immanuel, God with us.

The Lord Jesus was fully human and faced all the temptations that we have faced. Yet, he was without sin. This way, He could be the perfect Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Jesus gave the ultimate gift of His very life, suffering a shameful death on the cross.

And why? So that we could be reconciled, made right, with our Creator, our heavenly Father. This is the gift of eternal life. But more than that, it is the gift of presence. We can enjoy the presence of God and God can enjoy the presence of His children. This was God's purpose from the

beginning – a love filled joyous relationship –
Creator with His creation. Merry Christmas!

Amen and amen. Let us pray.