

**“JUST A FEW MORE GIFTS”**

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

**January 6, 2008**

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Here we are—we have arrived on Epiphany. This is the day when Jesus goes public. We might think of it as day of Jesus' IPO (Initial Public Offering). Anyway, on Christmas the story tells us that the angels and the shepherds come to worship the infant king. In an odd way the Christmas story is a story for insiders...just a few people are privy to the details of what happens in that barn and they are all there either by happenstance or by angelic invitation. But something changes on Epiphany. On Epiphany we celebrate that the birth of Jesus is no longer secret information, held only by a rag-tag bunch of shepherds, angels, and barnyard inhabitants. Instead, a brilliant light has led a group of magi to the child and they come bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although at just a few day old Jesus is too young to understand the significance of the visit from the magi, I am sure that Mary and Joseph and anyone who saw the prominent procession arrive at the home of Jesus was well aware that something was different about this child.

That is what we celebrate on Epiphany—that something was different about the child that was born in the manger and that with the arrival of the magi (the kings, or the wise men, as they are often called) the ancient proclamation of the arrival of the light has come to pass. In the same way that our Christmas celebrations are about the birth of Jesus fulfilling the promises of scripture, our Epiphany celebration exists because once again as Christians we note that the ancient scriptures are being fulfilled and as those who follow the teachings of the one who will grow up to be the prophet and savior Jesus we celebrate that the light of this child did not remain as story known only to a select few. Instead, the mystics and the rulers of the time wanted to know about and meet this child...and while the mystics did meet the child, Herod the power-hungry ruler would have to have someone else do his bidding.

On Christmas Eve at two services we read accounts of the birth of Jesus. Just last week Caroline read the birth narrative from the gospel of Luke again as we recapped what was the theological year 2007. Now, on January 6 we have again heard the story of the birth of Jesus. Some of you may be wondering exactly how long we are going to prolong this one little part of the story!?! Honestly, there were times this week when I wondered the same thing myself. But as we gather on the date when we mark the arrival of the magi to see the baby Jesus, I thought it was important that we spend a bit of time really thinking about what it meant that the story of the birth of Jesus wasn't an insider story—that his story immediately began to leak out.

I find it fascinating that we celebrate this day as one of great theological import when our gospel reading tells us that the wise men were initially at least arriving to see the baby Jesus on a mission from Herod. Imagine, if you will, how the story might have played out if instead of listening to the warnings of the dream-world they had returned to Herod to give him directions to the home of Mary and Joseph. I dare say that we may never have heard of the baptism of Jesus, the idyllic sponge of a twelve-year absorbing teachings in the temple, or the teacher/healer/prophet who altered the course of the ancient world and authored a faithful path for two millennia of followers.

And that is what I find amazing and compelling about the Epiphany story. Epiphany is not an excuse to prolong the Christmas story. Epiphany is a reminder that this story could have ended in a much different way. This day offers an opportunity for each one of us to enter the story again, for each of us to be reminded of the radically simple beginnings of Christ child, and for each of us to re-commit to offer our gifts to the God who offered the child to the world and forever made our story one of grace, love, and compassion.

So what does it mean for us to enter into the story again? First I think it means that we have an opportunity to take the story and make it ours, rather than make it something that happens to us. We are surrounded today (and will be for the rest of the season of Epiphany) by artwork that is part of this congregation's Epiphany Art Festival. Honestly, when I first came to this church I thought "that is a nice tradition," but I didn't think of the art in much of a theological way. However, if we are serious about thinking of Epiphany as the season when "our light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us" then we should see these artistic expressions as reminders that the light and the glory of the Lord comes in visions not just from angelic visitors of the past or ancient philosophers, but the glory of the Lord is manifest in people today and one of the ways that it is being poured out in this place is in the artistic eyes and hands and minds that have created these stunning works of art. Does any one of these pieces specifically speak to the birth of Jesus—maybe not in so many words, but just as the magi brought their most valuable gifts when they came to meet Jesus I would argue that the art that surrounds us represents the creativity, the passion, and the artistic essence of all who contributed to this festival. By celebrating Epiphany with the pieces of art that surround us we are celebrating with the best of what people have to offer and we are following in the ancient tradition of the magi.

However, for some of us stick figures are the height of our artistic endeavors. However, that does not mean that Epiphany is a lost season for us. Instead I use the role of the artistic voice in Epiphany merely as a model for us...we all have gifts that we can share that are useful in retelling the story of our faith and Epiphany is yet another reminder that as people of faith, as people searching for a way to meet and follow the child who is already in the process of growing into the adult that we know as our teacher and savior, we are called upon to offer whatever it is that we have and it will be good, and beautiful, and most importantly, it will be enough. Too often I think we get caught up in the gift giving of the Christmas season and we forget that in the aftermath of the holidays, when we are cataloging the events of the season, we aren't cataloging the gifts given or received, we are instead cataloging the time spent with family and friends, the food made and consumed with our loved ones, and the times of laughter and joy that were shared in the midst of taking a bit of time away from the grind of work and school and all that drive our normal daily routines. There is much suspicion that the tradition of gift giving at Christmas has its genesis in the gifts brought by the magi. However, for as much notoriety as the gold, frankincense, and myrrh receive—what the magi really brought to the infant Jesus was the promise that story would go on. For as they left the home of Jesus, they turned their back on Herod and set in motion the story that we now claim as our faith tradition. The important news is that this story no longer concerns the Magi and Herod. Instead this is our story and it is ours to do with it what we will. How then are we going to go forward in this Epiphany season? How are we being called to announce that darkness and fear will not rule the world—all because he has been born and his teachings have changed us? What is the vision

that we should be sketching out for our future? What pictures does the promise of the Magi's visit to the child-king make you eager to paint? What is it that you are being called to do as we continue to celebrate the gift of God's presence in our world?

The child is among us, and we have seen him. The only question that remains is, what gift will you bring?

Thanks be to God. Amen.