

A Gift of the Heart
Matthew 2:1-12
January 8, 2017 – Epiphany Sunday

The Sunday before Advent, now almost two months ago, was Reformation Sunday; and on that Sunday, I spoke of the great debate between Martin Luther and the Catholic Church over what was called “Works Righteousness.” The church maintained that one could “earn” their way into heaven by doing good works – specifically by giving money to the church. Martin Luther said, “No, no, no. The only way one can get into heaven is through faith.” He said, “One is justified, one is made right with God, by faith alone.”

And so, today. . . Today, two weeks after Christmas, we celebrate the arrival of the Magi, three “wisemen” coming from the East to bring precious gifts to Jesus, gifts befitting a newborn king. Works righteousness? No, I don’t think so. Three wisemen, three astronomers, three learned people of their time and culture, were looking for something special. The first century was a turbulent time in the Middle-East. Rome was pressing eastward from the Mediterranean, flexing its muscle as it went. Herod, the reigning king of Judea, was just plain crazy, a seriously paranoid and hugely powerful egomaniac. The people, caught between these two powerful factions, were suffering. Now, the wisemen probably came from Persia. Persia was on the outskirts of Roman rule, not as directly affected as the folks of Judea; but, still they were not isolated from the threats. Furthermore, the Persians, themselves were suffering from a sort of identity crisis as they attempted the reconcile centuries of Persian thought with the Hellenistic influences brought by Alexander the Great just a few centuries before Christ. Indeed, the wisemen were looking for something special, a savior who would bring peace and justice and righteousness and unity to a very fractured world.

Then, one day, they found it. They found it in a star. One day these astronomers were looking up in the sky, studying the constellation Pisces, the constellation of the Jews, and there they saw it. The planet Jupiter, the planet of the Jews, reversed direction, and came into alignment with the planet Mars, the planet of kings, and the brightness of this “star” was overwhelming. And the wise ones said to each other, “Something special is happening. We must go. We must go to find this newborn “king of the Jews.”

Friends, I tell you, the significance of the wisemen is not in the gold and frankincense and myrrh that they brought. The significant of the wisemen is in their faith. They had enough faith in what they saw in the heavens, that they mounted their camels and rode over a thousand miles to kneel before a baby in Bethlehem; because they knew that, with the birth of that baby, the world would

never be the same. No, it's not about the gifts the wisemen brought, it's about the faith that was in their hearts.

On that Christmas Eve, long ago, we're told that there were also shepherds in the nearby fields watching their flocks by night. Again, something miraculous appeared in the sky. We're told an angel of the Lord appeared before them, and they were terrified. And the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." And the shepherds said, "We've got to go. We've got to leave the flocks. We need to trust that they'll be okay. But we've got to go and see the baby who was born Savior of the world." The shepherds had faith, the faith to leave the flocks, to go and search out the baby, that they might worship him.

I note that the shepherds and the wisemen form a wonderful contrast. The wisemen were the richest among the people; and the shepherds. . . they were among the poorest. The shepherds didn't own the sheep. They were merely hired hands, paid to watch over the flock. But the wisemen and the shepherds both saw a sign in the sky; and they went, and they worshipped.

Indeed, on that Christmas Eve 2100 years ago, something very special happened. A very special child was born; and I think that specialness is well expressed in the writing of James Allan Francis, when in 1926, he wrote:

He was born in an obscure village as the child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in another obscure village.
He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty
and then for three years was an itinerant preacher.
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.
He never owned a home.
He never went to college.
He never traveled more than two hundred miles
from the place he was born.
He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness.
While he was still a young man, the tide of popular opinion
turned against him.
His friends ran away.
One of them denied him.
Another betrayed him.
He was turned over to his enemies.
He went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.

His executioners gambled for the only piece of property
he had on earth, his coat.
When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave
through the pity of a friend.
Twenty centuries have come and gone and today
he is the center of the human race
and the leader of the column of progress.
All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever sailed,
all the parliaments that ever sat and
all the kings that ever reigned,
put together, have not affected the life of people
on earth as powerfully
as that one solitary life.

Indeed this was a special child.

The hymn we just sang, “In the Bleak Midwinter” was originally a poem written by Christina Rossetti in 1872. It was set to music by the famous English composer Gustav Holst in 1906 for inclusion in a new English Hymnal. Now, I know there’s what I’ll call a superstition, in the best sense of that word. . . but there’s a superstition in this church that every time we program this hymn, we have a snow storm; but it a beautiful text set to a beautiful melody. Hear again the last verse of that hymn:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him; give my heart.

Friends, the star is still shining; and the star is calling us to take on the light of Christ. Our opening prayer for today asks that “we might be people of your radiant love, leaving footprints of light with every step we take.” I mentioned on Christmas Day how I like that word radiate; because I believe that, as true Christians, the love of Christ should pour off us, should radiate from you to everyone we meet. The star is still shining. Will we have the faith to follow the star?

What can I give him, poor as I am? By world standards, most of us are very rich financially; but it’s not about money. Compared to what God truly deserves from us, we are all very poor. It’s not about the lambs we bring. It’s not about the gold and frankincense, and myrrh. No, it’s about faith. The best we can give God is our faith and our love. The best we can give God is our hearts.

Luther said, “We are made right with God by faith alone.” The church said, “We are made right by doing good works.” John Wesley said, “Luther was correct, we are made right by faith; but, if we truly have faith, we will do the good works.” Jesus did tell us to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked. Jesus did tell us to go forth making disciples, spreading the Good News. But it’s still about faith.

This is Epiphany Sunday. An epiphany is a revelation, a discovery; and so, I invite you this Sunday and through the coming year, to discover Christ anew. Follow the star. Welcome Christ into your hearts; as you give your hearts to Christ. And, what does that look like? You’ve heard me say it dozens of times before – Agape Love.

“What I can, I give him; give my heart.” May your hearts be so filled with the love of Christ, that you truly radiate that love to all whom you meet not just at Christmas time, but throughout the coming year.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Christ child. Praise be to God for the experience of his love; and for the opportunities to share that love at all time and in all places.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Give us the faith, the courage, and the strength to follow the star,
wherever the path may lead.

Amen.

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