

Gifts That Matter

Matthew 2:1-12

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

January 5, 2014

So, Christmas is over, and all the gifts have been opened, and everybody's happy. Did you get everything you wanted? Did you *give* everything you wanted? Yeah, Christmas really is the time for gifts. I know we always think about Christmas gift-giving as symbolic of the gift of grace given to us in the form of our Lord Jesus. It occurred to me the other day that maybe this story of the magi, the 3 wise men, had something to do with that, too. It feels like the story of Jesus' birth isn't complete without their coming. It seems to me there are two parts to the story. The first is about how badly those wise men wanted to give the gifts. The second is about what the gifts meant.

Now, I know that all of us want to give gifts at Christmas. We do! It's a sure-fire way to tell people how you feel about them. I know that for us guys, if you're courtin' a lady, Christmas is a great time to show her your love. And ladies, the same goes for you, too. When you're a kid, you might not have any money, but you want to give your parents something good, too, for the same reason. Of course parents see to it that Santa makes Christmas wonderful for the kids. And you know, it's not the cost that's important, but what the gifts mean. We always stretch ourselves a bit in the gift-giving, especially if you're a kid, because we love the folks we're giving to. I remember one year I went with my classmates to an amusement park in late September. I had a fabulous day winning games, for which they gave you tokens you could redeem later for prizes. I won so much, I got a salad serving set for my mom, which I knew she really wanted, and something else for my dad. With the help of one of my friends, I hid those

things from late September until Christmas time. I think that's the only time I ever got any of my Christmas shopping done early! My point is, I really wanted to give those gifts. I think my parents were more touched by the elaborate work I did hiding those things for that long before Christmas.

For those wise men, you had all kinds of things working. They were courting Jesus! Magi, as they are properly called, were actually political figures. They were kings of a sort, kinda like regional kings, over a smaller area. Now just like you'd try to get in good with a girlfriend or boyfriend, that's a part of what drove these kings to Bethlehem. If you got in good with a new king at his birth, that almost insured he'd be an ally later on. And in that warring part of the world, that's a necessary thing.

Then there's the part about stretching yourself. These 3 kings were sure doing that. They had to travel a LONG ways from their homeland, which was probably Persia. They had to appear before Herod, who was known for his weirdness and violence. Then they had to figure out where the star was leading them, which isn't as easy as it sounds. They had a hard time. They had to do a lot. It's definitely harder than hiding a set of salad tongs and bowls for 3 months!

There's something in this for you and me to consider. I worry sometimes that our faith is too easy. How often have you stretched yourself to give something good to our God? We're so used to the ritual of putting our money in the offering plate – and of course that's necessary. But what can you or I do to stretch ourselves, to offer a gift like these magi did?

Once you understand about the hard work behind these gifts, then you have to deal with the message of the gifts themselves. And there is a message here. Let me get at it this way. How many of you have ever gifted somebody with a computer? Many of you have. That's an example of a gift that made you stretch a little bit, but that sent a message. The stretching was the fact that computers ain't cheap. The message is: "I want you to have this so your life will be better." And so it probably was; if you're taking classes, you probably have to have one, and you can use it to do your household budget, to communicate with family and friends, on and on. It does make your life better. I think you could say the same thing about a cell phone. I gave my wife her first one at Christmas 20 years ago. It made her life better because she felt safer with it. She could call me from down at VCU when she was leaving class; she called me when she was on the road, which she was a lot my first years in ministry. It made her life better.

There was an implicit message in the gifts those wise men gave, too. It's like they were saying to Mary and Joseph, "Here are some things Jesus will need when he grows up. They'll make his life better. They'll define his life." As you will soon see, they were intended to make *our* lives better, because there was another message in these gifts. It was a foreshadowing, a prediction, for Jesus about his life.

The first gift was gold, and that makes complete sense. Kings deal in gold. They were coming to see a king. Gold is instantly recognizable; it's the most valuable thing, tradable anywhere. It's beautiful, too, when you purify it and polish it up. They probably brought purified, polished gold bars to give him. To bring this to Jesus the baby meant recognizing that he was truly a king already. Now, I suppose that giving gold might seem

a little crass – it's about like giving *cash* for a Christmas gift. That's not much different from giving gift certificates, is it? Some people think giving gift certificates is crass. Don't worry about the money part of it – it's the *symbolism* of gold that matters here. Gold is for kings. The gift of gold was a prophecy that this child was to be a king, and to have a kingdom some day.

The second gift was frankincense, and this was expensive, too. This was stretching the budget a bit! But the expense wasn't the point. Everybody's got relatives who give them expensive, quirky gifts – like, aromatherapy stuff, or incense sticks, or different herbals you can put in your bath. Nice! Come to think of it, those *are* pretty good gifts. But talking about the frankincense in terms of it's qualities would miss the point. The people of that day who read Matthew's gospel would know immediately: frankincense's main use was in the Temple, for worship, but most especially for the time of sacrifice. Frankincense was what you used to "season" the sacrifice for God. Jesus was receiving a gift you'd give to a priest. So maybe this is saying he was a priest. No; more likely, this was another prophecy. Jesus was being "seasoned" for the sacrifice he would become. His life was defined by sacrifice.

The last gift was myrrh, another fragrance, another expensive thing – but a puzzling one. By Jesus' time, myrrh was used for only one thing: preparing the body for burial. People didn't keep it around their houses; it was bought, or more likely, given, at the time of death, to the grieving family. In case you didn't get the prophecy, it's this: this child is already destined to die. His death is the defining thing about his new-born life. Why else would you be preparing his body for death at his birth? He was born to die.

If you put all of this symbolism and prophecy together, you get something unbelievably powerful: this baby Jesus was born to a kingdom that would be bought by the sacrifice of his own life. It would be a kingdom that people from far and wide would want to belong to. And they'd go to great lengths, "stretch themselves," so to speak, to belong to it. You know why? Because in this kingdom, their lives would be made better. Their *after*-lives would be better because of the gift of his life! This was the gift everyone needed; this was the gift that showed you what the gift-giver thinks about you.

So, what do you or I do? In our world, we're usually receiving gifts from the very folks we're giving them to. They show you how they feel, you show them how you feel. And it doesn't have to be on an "equal worth" basis, either. Those stupid acrylic salad tongs and bowls weren't worth much, really; but to my mother, they were the most precious gift ever. It's because of the love behind them that they meant so much. YOU have an opportunity to show our Lord Jesus how you think of him. You'll do it by sharing the Good News of his free gift of grace with everyone. You're going to get a chance to set yourself up for that very soon. I have shared with the Session that I'd like to make January and early February a time for training them. Then, I want you to be ready to be trained yourselves. I'm not sure yet whether we'll do it overlapping the Session's training or not. We are preparing ourselves for a new time, when we get into our new building. Our ministry will be changed for the better. There are some very specific things you can do when we get there that make all the difference in whether or not people stay and continue hearing the Good News. That make a difference as to whether they hear it and understand it and receive it in the first place. The gift you give our Lord will be the time

and energy you commit to being trained, and then using that training as you serve.

Because so many around us need the Good News, that's a gift you can give that really matters. Enjoy the power and grace of God as you give your gift.