

GOOD GIFTS

1/6/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Epiphany: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

So, did you get some good gifts for Christmas? I did! I have one friend who's very generous! This year, besides the regular \$100 Nordstrom gift card, my friend also gave me an Echo Dot. I have to tell you, I am LOVING bossing around Alexa. "Alexa, turn on Country music; Alexa, turn up the volume; Alexa, turn off the music." Whatever I say, she does it. No negotiating, no delay...she simply does what I ask.

But I'll also share that I'm very glad I have cats as pets and not a snarky grey parrot. Did you hear about this? This woman—Marion Wischnewski—took in an African grey parrot named Rocco. He has a complicated history and has been known to use his power of language not-for-good, but the bottom-line is he is one smart bird. So, it didn't take him long to imitate his new family's use of their Alexa device, and he began ordering his favorite food online: "Alexa, order strawberries; Alexa, order broccoli."

I guess Marion Wischnewski gave the gift of hospitality to Rocco, and Rocco was ordering some other gifts he thought he needed. Typically, we give gifts to someone else, but who among us hasn't picked-up a few things for ourselves in the midst of our gift-buying?

This morning the gifts we focus on are those that the magi brought to meet the Christ-child. But those aren't the only gifts present in these readings that celebrate Epiphany. The passage from Isaiah, in particular, highlights how the arrival of the Christ-child isn't just about God, but our participation in God's salvation plan.

The text says: "arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you." It continues, "the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you." Yes, the light is God's light, and God's light is our guide, but these passages seem to indicate that there is a role for us to play; that this isn't just God's light, but "our light."

As I've mentioned in the past, one technique for studying Scripture is to look behind the text, within the text, and in front of the text as we ask explorative questions. In back of the text means looking at the historical context in which it was written; within the text is asking what the passage says just as it is, in a more literal sense; and in front of the text asks how this text might be speaking to us today.

Historically, Isaiah was written as a prophetic voice to bring hope to the people of Judea. There are images of an entire nation reclaiming its power, and of the Judean people returning to God. In that sense, part of this morning's passage is aimed not at individuals, but crafted to cry out to a nation that seems to be in darkness. They are reassured God's light will once again shine upon them.

Similarly, when we move forward in front of the text, and ask the question, "how might this passage be speaking to us?", we come to the awareness that we, too, have times when we feel, as people of God, that we are in darkness. We await God's light to shine in the world. But again, and again, we are reminded that it isn't God who comes just to save us, but God who enlists us to save the world.

This is likely some of the same process that was used by the creators of the lectionary to pair up readings such as those we have today, to show both the historical context of Jesus—that is growing up in a Jewish family where teachings from Isaiah would have been part of his

upbringing; the context in which he was born; and then, those theologians asking: “how might the people reading these texts apply them to their lives?”.

From that place we might ask questions such as: why is Herod frightened? What happens in-between him calling the magi—here referred to as wisemen—to find the Christ-child, and the dream they have that they should avoid Herod on the way back?

We don’t find the answer to those questions in the text, but what becomes obvious is that even if Herod had evil intentions, his participation becomes crucial to the word getting out that this amazing thing has happened. We are told the magi have learned through their studies about the birth of Christ, so they show up in Jerusalem, but they seem to be lacking some critical information about the specific location of the child. It is Herod who helps obtain the specifics of Bethlehem. Then, as if they’re on the same team, he enlists the magi to search “diligently” for the child.

Once they arrive, the magi find that the Christ-child, indeed has his own star. They marvel at all that has come to pass, and by going home another road, we can only guess even more people heard about the Good News of Christ’s birth.

All that to say, that it was more than just gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the magi brought to the scene. They brought forward their God-given gifts of prophecy, of dreaming, of being willing to travel, and their gift of sharing the Good News. Even Herod—in his own twisted way—contributed his gifts, using his influence to assist the magi.

That’s what the Epiphany is all about—about us using our gifts to share God’s Good News. As you know, those gifts come in many forms and can be utilized in many ways, but as we’re reminded in this morning’s passage from Ephesians, we have “become fellow heirs” not just recipients of God’s grace, but “heirs”, which means this our birthright to serve God in the world with our God-given gifts. Ephesians says: we are “members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

Having a gift of the spirit isn’t something special, in that one of you is the only one to have a gift and the rest of us don’t have any gifts; rather we each have gifts unique to us. Which is why, over the next six weeks in our nine o’clock adult education class, we will be exploring this in more detail. We’ll ask what are our God-given gifts? We’ll use an assessment tool to help identify them. We’ll ask how are we using these gifts? We’ll also explore how we might better recognize the spiritual gifts of others, so that we can invite them to further employ their gifts.

All too often, spiritual gifts are thought of in terms of those mentioned in the Bible: gifts of healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues, but there are day-to-day gifts that are no less important, such as listening, encouraging, teaching or mentoring, hospitality, administration, craftsmanship, compassion, being of service, and music.

So, if you were sent, along with the magi, what gifts would you bring to offer at the manger? Because we all know the world needs more than gold, frankincense and myrrh. At the same time, while it’s true that in the midst of growing divides over border issues and immigration, the world needs thoughtful negotiators; and in the midst of natural disasters the world needs people who can direct humanitarian efforts; and in the midst of an opioid crisis, the world needs professionals who can ask good questions and search for sustainable solutions; it’s also true that in the midst of our work environments, we need people who are encouragers, who take time to mentor others; in the midst of challenging familial relationships, we need people who can listen to us and help us see past our fears; and in the midst of celebrating

children in our church community, we need people who aren't worried about appearing silly, who are willing to get down on the floor and play.

All our gifts are needed—each and every one of them—because as it is explained in Ephesians, “this grace was given to ~~me~~ [us] to bring to ~~the Gentiles~~ [others] the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;”

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

Give the King your justice, O God, *
and your righteousness to the King's Son;

That he may rule your people righteously *
and the poor with justice;

That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, *
and the little hills bring righteousness.

He shall defend the needy among the people; *
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.

He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, *
from one generation to another.

He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, *
like showers that water the earth.

In his time shall the righteous flourish; *
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.

The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, *
and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.

All kings shall bow down before him, *
and all the nations do him service.

For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress, *
and the oppressed who has no helper.

He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; *
he shall preserve the lives of the needy.

He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, *
and dear shall their blood be in his sight.

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, **this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;** so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the

eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: `And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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." When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.