

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Magi: The Gifts We Bring”**

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Matthew 2:11

December 24, 2023 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent)

We’ve been on a journey with the Magi since the beginning of Advent three weeks ago. They arrive in Jerusalem some time after Jesus was born, following a strange astronomical phenomenon, journeying from far to the East, to seek out this new king whose birth this strange new star heralded.

And as we’ve followed them, we’ve been asking how does this journey speak into our own season of anticipation, of preparation, this season of Advent. As the Magi have gotten closer and closer to Bethlehem, so we have gotten closer and closer to Christmas Day.

And now, they arrive. And what do they do? Why should it make a difference to us what they do? Let’s go to God’s Word together. Matthew 2:11.

***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.***

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, you call us and invite us to come into communion with you, not because we are in and of ourselves so wonderful, but because by grace you have declared that you wish to be with us. We praise you, and we pray that we would further see signs of your grace around us, in how we live, in how we share, in how we speak. Shape us, we pray, in your grace by your Word. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

If an alien were to observe human behavior, you know, without any prior knowledge of human history or social norms or anything like that, and it saw how we did this common thing called gift-giving, what conclusions do you think this alien would make about us?

Gift-giving of course isn’t a strictly Christian thing or a strictly Christmas-related thing, though it probably hits a peak in December of each year. But gift-giving, for one reason or another, has been practiced across cultures and across the centuries. It’s as if there’s something fundamental in how we’re wired, and in how we’ve come together—and I’m talking almost sociologically here: how we’ve come together as a species—that we do this strange thing of just

giving another person something, something we feel they would value or enjoy, and at its purest, any such gift is done without any expectation of thanks or a gift in return. We are just compelled for some reason to show our appreciation to another person by giving them something, and this has gone on for millennia. Why is that, do you think?

The Magi, for some reason, felt compelled to bring gifts. Last week we talked about how even *before* they arrived in Bethlehem they were overwhelmed with joy. Well, now they've arrived, and they find the child, the infant Jesus, with his mother Mary. They kneel, pay him homage. And then what do they do? They open their treasure chests and offer gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There's a lot that has been said about the three kinds of gifts the Magi brought before Jesus. Gold often seen as recognition of Jesus' kingship, frankincense, with its common use as an incense in worship/temple settings, in response to Jesus' divinity, and finally myrrh, as a common substance for preparing a body after death, foreshadowing Jesus' mortality and sacrifice. Now whether the Magi themselves had those things in mind when they gave these gifts, I'm not so sure, but it's powerful imagery.

But maybe more important is just why they felt compelled to give the gifts they brought in the first place. I mean surely if you're Mary and Joseph, as these mysterious figures from the East show up, saying they had travelled many miles just to see the new king, it's kind of like the relative who travels cross-country to be with family and loved ones at Christmas: you're thinking, "Your being here was gift enough. You didn't need to bring presents with you."

And yet they felt compelled to do so. Why?

There's that pure, generous form of gift-giving, those shows of appreciation and recognition for someone else, given without expectation of something in return, or even of response necessarily from the other person. It's a gift. It's freely given.

But let's be honest. We don't always give gifts with the purest of motives.

You got the checklist gift. You have the list of people that you think you get gifts for, and when you get something and get it wrapped and ready for Christmas, you cross them off the list. And that's all well and good, to be organized about it, but how quickly does it turn into just another to-do list—okay got him covered, okay got her covered.

Then there's the guilt gift. Oh they gave me something last year, even while we didn't give them something, and it was kind of awkward, so we *have* to give them something this year.

Then there's the flattery gift. You know, when you're not all that appreciative of the person, but you want them to like you, like a boss or new in-laws or something like that, so you get them a gift.

Then there's the comparison gift. You give a gift not because you feel genuinely want to recognize and appreciate someone, but because you know other people will be getting them a gift, and you don't want to fall behind. Or if you think they're going to compare the gift you gave them to the gift you gave someone else, same sort of thing.

That last one we run into all the time. We have two boys kind of close in age, similar interests, get into the same toys, the same show, movies, that sort of thing together. Not long ago, they were both *really* into *Toy Story*. So for Harry this year—and I hope they're not watching this since it'll spoil the surprise—we got him a toy Rex. Rex is the dinosaur toy in *Toy Story*. We just got it off the internet; they sent it to us. Easy, right?

Well, it turns out, this Rex toy was a good bit smaller than we thought. I'm sure they had dimensions and everything online, but from the picture at least, hard to tell how big the toy was. So it got here, and it's about this big. Now that's not that big a deal, except that earlier this year for a birthday, Jack had also gotten a Rex the dinosaur toy, but Jack's Rex was much much bigger.

So now we're in a pickle. Do we give Harry this Rex for Christmas, knowing that he will immediately compare it to the Rex we had given Jack earlier? Do we return it and get another one the same size as Jack's? Or do we hold onto it and give it to him later, maybe when it's not as big a deal?

The bigger issue is that we're more consumed with how our gift to him will compare to some other gift, or how he will compare this gift to someone else's gift, than we are of giving our son something that he will truly value and enjoy. Now all that's not the fault of a three-year-old. But what has happened to how we approach gift-giving if *that's* what we're so worried about?

I mean what would it have looked like if the Magi showed up in Bethlehem, present their gifts, and then they got all self-conscious whether Jesus would like the gold better, or the frankincense better, or the myrrh?

But that doesn't seem to be going on here, does it?

They're struck by the appearance of a strange new star in the sky, somehow track it and follow it for many miles, come to Judea, rub elbows with a king and his scholars, and finally to this town of Bethlehem at the end of a wondrous journey, seeking out the new king who had been born.

And then to signify that they had reached their destination, on one hand the star stops over it, so that's pretty amazing, but on the other they see this displaced family staying in simple accommodations in a house. An amazing declaration of the heavens matched with humble appearances on the ground.

And it was in response to that that they bring their gifts to this new king, a response to the humility of Jesus.

Friends, I know that at home right now for any number of us there are presents yet to be wrapped or distributed or loaded up for gift exchange tomorrow or later. I know that for any number of us the whole notion of thinking about, purchasing, wrapping, and giving presents around Christmas means little else than one more stressful thing to worry about, and that it's been that way for some time. That ship sailed long ago.

But what would happen if this story of the Magi made us stop, as we ourselves come to Bethlehem, to this new king, to consider how the gifts we bring—and you could talk about what we dedicate to the Lord and how we dedicate ourselves to the Lord, and you could talk about the gifts we bring for each other—but may we consider how the gifts we bring might be like the Magi's: a response to the astounding humble grace they saw in Bethlehem those many years ago, of a king whose birth was declared by the very heavens themselves, and yet was born in humble estate.

What I think you'll find is that the whole notion of giving a gift is less about giving the gift and more about what it says about you, and how we feel how we know that the grace of God in Christ Jesus is given first. So let us hear it. Let us be shaped by it, transformed by it, and let us respond to the miraculous coming of the Lord in how we ourselves give selflessly, in a way that seeks to honor and lift up those receiving it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.