

January 5, 2020

Epiphany: “The Gifts of the Magi”

Matthew 2:1-12



Today we are celebrating Epiphany, the time when the wise ones from the East finished their journey and finally met the Christ child. These folks are important figures from all over the world, despite the fact that we don't know how many of them there were or their names or what all they gave to Jesus. All we know for sure was that there were some special visitors from a far off-land and some gifts were given. This room for interpretation leaves exactly that...and so, of course, every Christmas there are an abundance of cartoons depicting the wise men and their off-the-mark gift giving. There are many cartoons about the wise men bringing gifts to baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph, and having that be nice, but then the wise women show up and have practical gifts like diapers, freezer casseroles, and milk pumping tips. Or pointing out that the wise women would have asked for directions and arrived on time and not made a pit stop with Herod in Jerusalem at all.

But really, what was it like for the wise ones to show up with the wrong gift? The wise ones, you may remember, were powerful Zoroastrian astrologers, respected in society. They traveled a long way, probably from the area known as Persia, from what today would be known as Iran or Iraq or Saudi Arabia. And during their travels, they got a little sidetracked. No, let's be honest, they got A LOT sidetracked. We can understand their train of thought, right? There is a new, important king on the block and we will go find him. Kings live in palaces. Palaces are in political centers. Jerusalem is a political center. Therefore, the king will be there. Oh, wise ones, why did you use the logic of human power arrangements rather than divine humility?

And find a king they did, as they met with Herod and inquired as to the location of the new king. And, as we discussed last week, Herod the Great was a ruthless ruler, and a cunning, manipulative politician. So we shouldn't be that surprised when Herod, who was always insecure about his power and position, attempted to get the magi to do his legwork and find out more about this child. The magi agreed and left Jerusalem, and apparently somehow got back on track and went to Bethlehem. They found the house where the mother and child were, and entered.

And something miraculous happened. They recognized Jesus. They recognized the importance of this child. And they knelt down, assumed a position of respect, and paid him “homage.” Some Bible translations make this clearer to modern readers by saying they “worshipped him.”

Then comes the gift giving. So the expensive, extravagant gifts were given to a poor, unwed, teenage mother in a small town and her young child, who was more likely to chew on a brick of gold rather than know what it was for. These were not the right gifts for the situation. Perhaps that’s why they went astray toward Jerusalem. They had brought gifts fit for a king, for a wise ruler, for someone more like the Son of Herod than the Son of God: gold and frankincense and myrrh, sweet and expensive spices...surely the powerful in Jerusalem would have a use for these, would know what to do.

But I wonder, if even though the wise ones had misread the situation, or made assumptions about what kind of king they would find, if they did have the right gifts with which to adore baby Jesus.

The exact right gift was the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, because that’s what they had. The right gift was to spend time pursuing the feeling they had that something special, something important, something big had just happened in the birth of this child. The right gift was to put aside their power, their privilege, their status, and kneel down at the feet of a small child. The right gift was paying attention to dreams, recognizing the dire political situation and choosing the side of justice. The right gift was to humbly recognize one who would show the way towards living justly with his life, no matter what the powers that be demanded or expected.

My friend Al reminds me of these wise ones, someone not afraid to divest themselves of their privileged status in favor of honoring the way of justice.

If you were to visit Oberlin, Ohio on a Saturday around noon, you may see some kindly Midwestern folks sporting homemade cardboard signs fixed to yardsticks saying things like “Peace is possible” and “War is unjust.” The weekly Peace Vigil has been going on every Saturday since September 15, 2001, the Saturday after the 9/11 attacks, when my dear pastors Mary and Steve Hammond from Peace Community Church of Oberlin gathered with some congregants to demonstrate against escalating violence in the Middle East. Up until last June, you’d have seen a tall, gangly elderly man wearing a bright yellow raincoat or a “No Nukes” t-shirt holding a “No War with Iran” sign. That man was Al Carroll, a dear friend of mine and longtime peace activist, including involvement in the Baptist Peace Fellowship of

North America. Al was a physicist, and during the Vietnam War he worked at the famous Brookhaven lab on Long Island, experimenting with small particles. During this time, there was a proposal for his lab to experiment with a process that would basically make nuclear weapons smaller and more accessible. Al and his colleagues protested this use of technology, and were ultimately successful.

Due to his long career in physics and his close brush with nuclear power, Al spent most of his retired life continuing his love of learning by auditing classes at Oberlin College, my alma mater. Though I met Al while attending Peace Community Church of Oberlin, I also took a few classes alongside this dear man about 60 years my senior. One of these classes was a class on Islam, with the Professor Jafar Mahallati. Professor Mahallati was Iranian, from the historically significant city of Shiraz, the ancient hometown of the mystic poet Hafiz. During the 1980s, he had served as an ambassador to the UN and was instrumental in brokering the peace deal that ended the Iran-Iraq war. Following this, he had returned to one of his great loves, teaching, and wound up at Oberlin in the Religion and Language departments. Among the assignments for this class was meeting Professor Mahallati for tea and talking about peacebuilding, or perhaps memorizing a verse like this for recitation in front of the class:

A Great Need by Hafiz

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.

Al Carroll and Professor Mahallati became good friends. Out of the tense situation post-9-11, Al had decided he needed to learn more about Islam and peacemaking in different religious traditions and pursued education in this area. The class I shared with Al was one of many he had taken with Jafar, and sometimes he would invite Jafar to the weekly Peace Vigil.

For Al and for Jafar, friendship is key to peacebuilding.

The honest, open encountering of the other; the willingness to see yourself in another's situation; the compassion to witness how another human experiences the world and recognize that your wellbeing is bound up with theirs. Recognition is key to friendship. As Rumi says, "What you seek is seeking you."

Perhaps this is what the wise ones discovered. They were seeking a king, and had only envisioned this king one way, in a way that would appreciate gold, frankincense, myrrh, fine clothes, whatever they had brought with them to honor him. But unbeknownst to them, that king was also seeking them: in encountering the child Jesus, their lives were changed. Like a former nuclear physicist shifting from using the gifts of his knowledge and curiosity to benefit war to lay down his gifts and humility in the work of peace building, setting himself against everything his career had been about, the magi divested themselves of the status given by Herod. They disobeyed Herod's orders. They let dreams guide them on a path that would not lead to Herod's murder of Jesus. They were not ashamed to humble themselves at the feet of a child, recognizing the way of Love in front of them, the way of Love that was seeking them all along.

Today, at this challenging time in history, I sadly say that I recognize a feeling that we are on the verge of war. And I think I would know what this feels like, since this country has been at war for over 67% of my life, and over 95% of my brother's life (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/08/22/heres-how-much-of-your-life-the-u-s-has-been-at-war/>). And since Thursday and the assassination of General Soleimani, I have seen Facebook and Twitter and news outlets sharing stories of more young people taking oaths to serve and protect, going off to basecamp and being deployed to Iraq. I have also seen news outlets jump at every bit of information, and I am reminded that war is a lucrative endeavor, of course not only for media, but especially for weapons manufacturers, arms dealers, security companies, fossil fuel companies, tech giants like those in our own backyard, and politicians who buy into the idea that supporting war guarantees re-election. There are voices crying out about "patriotism" and "support the troops" and "protecting America's interests" and "safety and security," voices that do not question why new recruits are mostly poor and working-class people under the age of twenty; not questioning why it is not supportive of those who have given their lives over to the military to protest war and keep them home in their communities. Honestly, figuring out to say this week was hard...until I talked with some of my fellow millennial pastor friends, who spoke truths like, "But aren't we on the brink of war every Sunday?" This shouldn't push us towards normalizing war into apathy, but to question why there is so much of it.

In considering what Epiphany means today, what encountering the Christ child has to teach us here and now, I remember the lessons from Jafar Mahallati, and I turn to poetry, one of the greatest teachers of friendship, compassion and empathy, a great source of wisdom. In exploring Iranian poetry in particular, I ran across this quote from an article by a US American poet regarding her experiences attending Persian poetry readings: "In the US, if a person is under stress, they are told to sit in a room and meditate. In [Persian] culture, they are told to read poetry."

From the poet Hafiz:

I know the way you can get
When you have not had a drink of Love:

Your face hardens,
Your sweet muscles cramp.
Children become concerned
About a strange look that appears in your eyes
Which even begins to worry your own mirror
And nose.

Squirrels and birds sense your sadness
And call an important conference in a tall tree.
They decide which secret code to chant
To help your mind and soul.

Even angels fear that brand of madness
That arrays itself against the world
And throws sharp stones and spears into
The innocent
And into one's self.

O I know the way you can get
If you have not been drinking Love:

You might rip apart
Every sentence your friends and teachers say,
Looking for hidden clauses.

You might weigh every word on a scale
Like a dead fish.

You might pull out a ruler to measure
From every angle in your darkness
The beautiful dimensions of a heart you once
Trusted.

I know the way you can get

If you have not had a drink from Love's
Hands.

That is why all the Great Ones speak of
The vital need
To keep remembering God,
So you will come to know and see Him
As being so Playful
And Wanting,
Just Wanting to help.

That is why Hafiz says:
Bring your cup near me.
For all I care about
Is quenching your thirst for freedom!

All a Sane man can ever care about
Is giving Love!

Perhaps we don't have the right gifts, the relevant gifts, the gifts that will make all the difference. But look at what we do have: The gifts of recognizing ourselves in others. The gifts of poetry. The gifts of giving to those in need. The gifts of humbling ourselves in favor of encountering a different way of being, a new way of loving justly. These are the gifts of the magi.

May it ever be so.