

“Sharing Gifts”

Luke 2:25-32

They were called Magi . . . we know them as wise men. They were astrologers, holy men of a foreign religion. They had observed a strange celestial phenomenon, which they interpreted to mean that a new king had been born in Judea. According to Matthew’s gospel, they traveled to honor him, bringing valuable treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – precious gifts indeed.

In their giving of gifts they were wiser than they realized. Gift-giving, it turns out, was at the heart of all Jesus would say and do. God is like a parent, Jesus would teach, who loves to shower sons and daughters with good gifts. The kingdom or commonwealth of God that Jesus constantly proclaimed was characterized by an abundant, gracious, extravagant economy of grace, of generosity, of gift-giving. “It is better to give than to receive”, Jesus taught, and his followers came to understand Jesus himself as a gift expressing God’s love to the whole world.

So, in memory of the wise men’s gift-giving to Jesus, in honor of Jesus’ teaching and example of giving, and as an echo of God’s self-giving in Jesus, we joyfully give one another gifts when we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Not everyone felt generosity in response to this new baby. King Herod was furious about anyone who might unsettle the status quo. When he deployed troops to the Bethlehem region with orders to kill all infant boys, Joseph was warned in a dream to escape. So the family fled south to Egypt, where Jesus spent part of his childhood as a refugee.

How meaningful it is that members of other religions – the Magi from the east and the Egyptians to the south – help save Jesus’ life. Could their role in the Christmas story be a gift

to us today? Could they be telling us that God has a better way for religions to relate to one another?

Through the centuries, religions have repeatedly divided people. Religions – including the Christian religion – have too often spread fear, prejudice, hate, and violence in our world. But in the Magi’s offering of gifts to honor the infant Jesus, and in the Egyptians’ protective hospitality for Jesus and his refugee family, we can see a better way, a way Jesus himself embodied and taught as a man. They remind us that members of Earth’s religions don’t need to see their counterparts as competitors or enemies. Instead, we can approach one another with the spirit of gift-giving and honor, as exemplified by the Magi. We can be there to welcome and protect one another, as exemplified by the Egyptians.

Instead of looking for faults and errors by which other religions can be discredited, insulted, and excluded, we can ask other questions: What good can be discovered in this religion? Let us honor it. What treasures have they been given to share with us? Let us warmly welcome them. What danger do they face? Let us protect them. What gifts do we have to share with them? Let us generously offer them.

According to Matthew, when King Herod died, Joseph had another dream telling him it was safe to return to his homeland. But Herod’s son still ruled Judea, the region around Bethlehem, so the family went farther north to another region, Galilee. They resettled in Nazareth, Galilee – which would be Jesus’ address throughout the rest of his childhood and young adulthood.

So, having been protected by the Magi and the Egyptians, Jesus grew up as a Galilean Jew. The Jews were the descendants of the Judeans who had survived the Babylonian invasion

over five centuries earlier. They had not lost that identity while living under exile in Babylon. No had they lost that identity over the following centuries, when they survived occupation and oppression by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Because the Jews had so courageously survived oppression and mistreatment by others, and because they believed God had given them special blessings to enjoy and share with everyone, no wonder Jewish identity was highly cherished. No wonder it was repeatedly affirmed and celebrated through holidays like Passover and rites of passage like circumcision.

Luke's gospel doesn't tell us about the Magi or the Egyptians. For Luke, the next big event after Jesus' birth came eight days later, when Jesus' parents took him to the Temple in Jerusalem to be circumcised, a primary sign of Jewish identity for every newborn son. You can imagine his parent's surprise when an old man, a perfect stranger named Simeon, came up to them in the Temple and took Jesus from their arms and began praising God. "This child will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and a glory to God's people, Israel", Simeon said. He was seeing in Jesus a gift for us and for them both, not one against the other or one without the other.

Old Simeon the Jew in Luke's gospel and the non-Jewish Magi from the East in Matthew's gospel agree: This child is special. He is worthy of honor. He has gifts that will bring blessing to his own people, and to all people everywhere.

To be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to know ourselves as part of a tradition and, through that tradition, to have a history and an identity to enjoy, preserve, and to share. And to be alive in the adventure of Jesus is to see others as part of their unique traditions, too, with their own history, identity, and gifts. Like the Magi, like the Egyptians, like old Simeon . . . we

don't have to see people of other religions in terms of us versus them. We can see people of other religions as beloved neighbors, us with them, them with us, with gifts to share.

May we who follow Jesus discover the gifts of our tradition and share them generously, and may we joyfully receive the gifts that others bring as well. For every good gift and every perfect gift comes from God.

May the peace of God . . .

#300 – The First Noel