

“Opening Our Gifts”

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6                      Matthew 2: 1 – 12

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Today, we celebrate one of the wonderful festivals in the church year: Epiphany. The word literally means “appearance”, but we usually associate it with the visit of the Wise Men to the Christ Child and with the gifts they brought to him. This event is one of the main reasons that gift-giving has become central to the celebration of Christmas. In our culture, we have subordinated Epiphany to Christmas as the gifting time, but in many other cultures, gifts either come daily during the 12 days of Christmas, beginning at Christmas and culminating on Epiphany (which, by the way is January 6), or all gifts are given on Epiphany itself.

Because giving is so central to our Christian experience, we talk about it often in the church. Sometimes we look more at the activity of giving than at the nature of the gift – except, of course, when we talk about giving (money) to the church. But this sermon is not about the activity or even the specific nature of our gifts. It has to do with how we carry our treasure and how we can get to it when we need it or want it.

We are not as different from the wise men as we might think. They embarked on a long journey in the expectation of finding the one who would be the saving hope of the world. They did not know where they were going. They simply followed the light of the star, which told them that a great gift was to be found at the end of the journey. We, also, are on significant journeys, as individuals and as a congregation. We travel great distances – whether measured in terms of miles or knowledge or years. We might even measure our journey in terms of our ability to enter into intimate relationships with one another and with life itself. Sometimes, we too, do not know precisely where we are going, but like the Wise Men we follow the light as best we can.

The wise men brought treasures with them, hidden deeply in their baggage. According to the story the treasures are gold, frankincense, and myrrh, all precious and costly items. But the Wise Men brought more than that. They also brought their hope, their faith, and their ability to respond to God’s new gift to the world of a child who had come to transform life itself. Some of our treasures, too, are material things, but we also bring deeper treasures that are part of our basic God-given and created nature. Some treasures we have found along the way – some we have created out of our own unique artistry and some have been given to us as others have shared their treasures with us.

You never know what is going to happen when you read a sacred text. I have read these twelve verses from Matthew countless times. I know the story so well. But I don’t know all there is to know about it. That is the mark of a good story. It keeps sharing its treasure in deeper and deeper ways. Until reading the story this year, I have read, but never quite noticed the verse, “They opened their treasures.” It all of a sudden became clear to me that this was not merely a filler line in the story. That they needed to find and open their treasures at the right time is a significant part of the story.

Let's consider this idea in the context of the larger story. The Magi (Wise Men) had been traveling, probably for many months. Tents, food, clothing, maps, compasses, and star charts all had to be readily accessible to aid them in their journey. Packed underneath all the practical resources they needed for the journey itself was their treasure. It was from this deeply held treasure that they would make their gifts to the child they were expecting to find. The treasure was not needed every day. It had a special function and so it was packed away deeply among their belongings in the safest possible places.

We can assume that it took some effort to find, reach, and unpack the treasures that were to be their gifts to this special child. Until this moment, they were merely travelers, using the materials and tools of the traveler. Now, as they were standing before the infant Jesus, it was finally time for their gifts to be shared. Without reading too much into the story, we can assume that the gifts they brought actually were more than just the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Their gifts were their faithfulness, their willingness to journey far from their homes, their hope for the well being of the world, and their ability to appreciate their wonder at God's expression of love and faithfulness to all the world in the gift of this special child. One might say that their greatest present to the child in the manger was the nature of their presence.

Jesus, this infant in the manger, created the occasion for the Wise Men to gain access to their treasure and to make themselves known by it. And so it is for us. We do not ordinarily carry our treasure "out in front" where everyone, including ourselves, has easy access to it. In fact, when people leave their treasures out in the open, those very treasures get in the way of the necessities of survival. The time comes, though, when it is appropriate to dig deeply into our being where we find our most precious possessions. Perhaps we do not need what is deepest in us simply to make a living, or keep a house, or facilitate the overall maintenance of a church. Of course, we make use of many of our talents and abilities all the time, and while they are valuable and useful, those particular talents and abilities do not necessarily constitute our treasures.

Sooner or later, the time comes in life when our usual resources and abilities are not enough, when life challenges us at a deeper level. At such times, whether in the face of a profound gain or loss, in response to a new relationship, or when we broaden into an awareness or perspective that doesn't fit what we have always believed, it is then that we reach more deeply into ourselves to where our treasures lie. Often we do not know what we are capable of until circumstances call for a more profound response.

Even if we know at some level what is in our inner treasure chest, we are prone to forget what is there. There is always a mystery surrounding our deepest treasures. We don't necessarily know what is there unless there is occasion to look. In the fourth step of Alcoholics Anonymous, participants are called on to "Make a searching and fearless moral inventory". Usually people fear this step because they think it is only about admitting to all the bad things they have ever done and recognizing all the selfish motives that they have. The great surprise of the fourth step is that underneath the layers of self interest, fear, greed, and narrow mindedness people eventually find wonderful aspects of themselves that they did not even imagine could be part of them. Their inner being turns out to contain some terrific surprises. So, our inner treasures may not be neatly and carefully packed away just waiting for the right situation. They may be lost,

buried under piles of concerns, worries, daily activities, and poor self image. We may stumble across our treasures when we least expect them to be present.

To live life with the knowledge that the resources will be available at the right time is to live a life of faith. Knowing that if we dig down deep enough when faced with opportunities for service, celebration, sacrifice, creativity, or love, we will find what we need is the mark of the faithful person who is prepared to live life to the fullest.

The Wise Men did not know where they were going. They just knew that they had to follow the star, wherever it might lead. They had to complete the journey. And so it is here. This congregation is on a journey and no one knows where it will lead.

Do we, then, believe that sufficient treasure and resource will be found as needed within this community of faith as the unique journey continues?

Be prepared to be amazed and surprised by the treasures that will be found whenever the time is right. We believe that all creation, including human beings, reflects the image of a God who is loving, generous, and creative. I invite all to be ready and open to discover the evidence of God's creative spirit in the relationships, choices, and personal and collective journeys that lie ahead.