

THE THREE GIFTS OF EPIPHANY

(01/10/10)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

“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.” (Matthew 2:11)

Today is the First Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany, also known as “Twelfth Night,” is the day when we celebrate the visit of the Three Kings, the Three Wise Men, or the Three Magi to the stable. It is also the date that the church has designated for the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus, which obviously took place about thirty years after the wise men’s visit.

The liturgical color, the color of my stole and our paraments today is white. White is the color of Christmas. Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas season. It is the day when many of us take down our Christmas tree and other Christmas decorations. The liturgical color for next Sunday, the Second Sunday after Epiphany or what the liturgical calendar calls the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, changes to green.

Even though Epiphany, which is always celebrated on January 6, was this past Wednesday, we are celebrating it today. We usually take down the Christmas tree and wreaths in our sanctuary on Epiphany, but we leave the crèches and the Advent wreath in their place for one more Sunday. We do not light the four Advent candles because symbolically they have more to do with the preparation for Christmas than they do with the celebration of Christmas. We leave the Christ candle in the center of the wreath lit on the first Sunday after Epiphany as another way of extending the Christmas season and symbolizing the light that hopefully extends past the Christmas season into what the church has called “ordinary time.”

As I mentioned in my newsletter message, which you will receive today, I like the idea of extending the Christmas season. As we discussed in our Diaconate meeting

this past Tuesday night, many churches sing Christmas hymns only on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They want to emphasize the theme of waiting or anticipation throughout the season of Advent. They don't want to drain off the feeling that attends the celebration of the birth of the Christ child by singing Christmas hymns too early.

That way of thinking makes sense to me when it comes to the season of Lent and the celebration of Easter. I wouldn't want to sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" the first Sunday after Ash Wednesday, although it is technically true every day and could very well be sung every Sunday. Many churches do not use the word "alleluia" in worship during Lent. In the Roman Catholic Church, the holy water with which people bless themselves as they enter the sanctuary, symbolizing a reenactment of their baptism, is removed from the little basins during Lent. Some Roman Catholic churches substitute sand, others small stones for the water. They do not baptize infants or adults during Lent, but only at the Easter Vigil the night before Easter.

When we discussed this tradition at the Diaconate meeting, the consensus was that, though we understand the rationale for not singing Christmas hymns during Advent, we prefer to extend the Christmas season a little on both ends. So we sing one Advent hymn and one Christmas hymn every Sunday during Advent, and we usually sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are" on the first Sunday after Epiphany. We want to do everything we can to prolong the Christmas spirit.

This morning, on the First Sunday after Epiphany, let us consider the lesson of the three kings. It is the story of a seeking. It is the story of a sign, the star of Bethlehem, the assurance that God helps those who are seekers. It is the story of hardship and hazard, the temptation to turn back, and the wrath of King Herod. It is a story that promises life for those who embark upon the journey.

The hymn "We Three Kings of Orient Are" describes the gifts that the three kings or wise men lay before the Christ child. The bringing of gifts is a reminder to us that we should never come to worship or to the church empty-handed. We should not come to

worship or to the church expecting only to receive. We should come expecting and prepared to give. Each of the gifts left at the altar of the manger by the three kings is significant not only in what it symbolizes concerning the life of Christ, but also for what it symbolizes in our lives. The three gifts symbolize three dimensions of the life that Jesus was destined to live, but they also symbolize three parts of us that we need to offer up, to lay before our Lord.

Let us reflect on these gifts using the well-known words of the hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” As we do so, let us think of the title of this hymn as referring not only to the articulation of the thoughts of the three kings who came to the manger 2,014 years ago, but as an articulation of our thoughts and feelings as we come to the manger today, as we pay homage and offer our gifts to the Christ child.

*Born a king on Bethlehem's plain.
Gold I bring to crown him again.
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.*

According to legend, Caspar was the king who offered gold to the baby Jesus. Gold is a symbol of royalty. It reminds us that Christ is a king, not a king like Herod, but a king who would rule our hearts. Gold symbolizes the inner treasure of the kingdom of God, what Jesus calls the “treasure hidden in the field.” Like our common gold, it is a treasure that will never tarnish. This treasure makes us truly rich, not in material possessions, but in the Spirit.

If we, like Caspar, offer the gold of our lives to God, we will not mistake the inner treasure for outer treasure; we will not mistake “the true gold” for what the alchemists called “the common gold.” If we fail to discover the gold within us because we have projected an inner spiritual reality onto an outer substance or state of affairs, we may spend our lives foolishly chasing “outer gold.” If we confuse the inner with the outer, the desire to accumulate wealth and possessions can mutate into an obsession that can never be satisfied.

The act of offering our gold to the Christ child serves as a counter to the attachment, to the grasping which the Buddhists remind us is the source of so much suffering. When we grasp, we do not share. Our hands, our hearts, and our minds are closed. This brings unhappiness to us and to others, not only those we love but those around the world who do not have enough to live because we have more than we need. In the New Year, if we remember the gift of the first wise man, we will offer up our gold before our Lord.

*Frankincense to offer have I;
Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, all men raising,
Worship Him, God on high.*

Melchior, the second king, offered frankincense to the Christ child. Incense is burned as an offering to a god. It symbolizes the burnt offering of our ego, of our pride. It reminds us that we stand in relation to God, the spiritual dimension and the spiritual center of our life, and that this God is “nigh” as well as “on high.” This God is “Emanuel,” God with us. We are enjoined to raise our prayers and our praise to this God in our worship.

Incense is also believed to drive away demons or evil spirits. This is why at a Roman Catholic or Orthodox funeral the priests circumambulate the casket swinging an incense holder filled with burning incense. I have trouble understanding exactly what that has to do with the dead, or why we should need to drive away demons or evil spirits from the body of a dead person. I prefer to think of demons or evil spirits as those inner thoughts, obsessions, and addictions that pull us, the living, off center, that pull us away from living a Christian life, a life of compassion.

Incense is also a reminder of our mortality. In Zen Buddhist meditation, a stick of incense is lit at the beginning of the meditation and remains in meditation until it has burned itself out. As the stick of incense slowly turns to ash, it reminds us of our mortality, that we will one day turn to ash. It also symbolizes the emptying or cleansing of ourselves, the transformation that can take place through prayer or meditation.

The offering of frankincense before the Christ child is a reminder that God alone is the true object of our worship. It is only when we find our grounding in the living God that we will discover the resources for not only surviving the storms that life will bring us in the coming year, but for growing and being transformed through them.

*Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

The third king, Balthasar, placed a gift of myrrh before the Christ child and his mother. Myrrh was used in embalming. This gift was a harbinger, presaging the suffering that our Lord and his mother would eventually experience. Because Jesus the Christ was human as well as divine, he suffered. He felt the physical pain of his crucifixion. He felt the emotional pain of the betrayal and denial of his followers. The agony, the passion, the suffering and death are a central part of the story, a central dimension of the life of Christ and of our lives.

If we offer the gift of myrrh to the Christ child, we affirm our belief that suffering, that even death is a part of life, a part of the great plan that God wills for us. No one escapes it, not even the Son of God. This means that we should not try to eliminate “sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, or dying,” but rather we should try to find meaning in or through them, through the ways they shape our soul.

In making our offering of myrrh, we offer Christ the voluntary gift of our own death. We affirm our willingness to enter into the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that is symbolized in Christ's death and resurrection. In Romans 6:5-6, the apostle Paul tells us that our old self has to be crucified with Christ so that we will no longer be enslaved to sin. He tells us we need to die to our sins, to what we have been, in order to open ourselves to a new life in Christ.

We stand this morning at the close of the year that has passed and on the threshold of the year that lies before us. If we are honest, we know we need to make

some New Year's resolutions. Even though we may not follow through on them as fully as we like, they are reminders of the ways we need to change.

It is difficult to break the unhealthy patterns of our lives, the actions that bring suffering to us and to those whom we love. Paul knew how difficult it is to let go of the old self, our old ways. As he confessed in Romans 7:15: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Our New Year's resolutions are expressions of hope that in the year to come, with the help of God, we will be able to experience a transformation of our inner mind.

As we emerge from the Christmas season, and as we step forward into the New Year, let us, like the three wise men, lay our gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before the Christ child. Let us enthrone him as king. Let us worship him as Lord. And let us offer him the death of our pride, our ego, our self-centeredness that we might carry the light of Christmas, the light of the Christmas star within our hearts and offer it to the world in the year to come.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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