

TRAVELING WITH GIFTS

*St Andrew's UC, Sudbury; January 10, 2010
(Epiphany)*

Most Christmas manger scenes I've come across over the years
have included at least eight people:
Joseph, Mary, Baby Jesus, two shepherds, and three Wise Men.
Generally, there's an angel included, and some stable animals.
For many years I thought—although the first Nowell the angel did say
was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay—
that three wise men from the East pulled into Bethlehem
with their camels later that same night.

I know better now.

Just like I know that Christmas doesn't really start till Christmas Day
and everything else in December before that is Advent.

I also know that the Wise Men coming into the nativity story
signal the end of the Christmas season
and usher in the time we call Epiphany.

It doesn't help, though, that some Christmas carols
(like The First Nowell) conflate the two stories
and talk about shepherds and wise men all in the same song.

So do Christmas greeting cards—
they often show the camel train coming right up to the stable.

We've gotten a little more used to the ides
that the magi aren't actually part of the manger scene.

We keep the camels at bay and try not to sing about the wise men
until after Christmas.

We've come to realize that these wise men (astrologers, stargazers, magi)
would have traveled for close to two years
from the time they first noticed a new star rising in the heavens.

The story tells us that they did, in fact, come to Bethlehem,
but by that time Jesus was a toddler
and the family had moved from the stable into a house.

We don't know how many magi there might have been,

although tradition suggests three.
We don't know whether they were men or women,
and so I'm going to call them "wise ones."
Wise ones who studied the stars—
the same stars that shone over Bethlehem,
the little town of nativity....

The time in which the Christ-Child was born
was a rough and frightening time in that land—
a time of soldiers, heavy taxes, slavery, poverty, a cruel king...
It was a time "when the voice of God was but a thin whisper."
For centuries the people had been waiting, waiting.
Watching for signs of the One who was to come,
the One sent by God to lift their burden, free them from oppression,
cast off the chains of hate and fear and hopelessness.
Waiting and waiting...
How long, O God, how long?

That refrain still pulses through us, doesn't it?
How long, O God, how long?
How long until we no longer hear the cries of starving children?
How long until everybody has a safe place to lay their head?
How long until people stop fighting
and start treating each other with love and respect?
How long until our dreams come true?

It's no wonder that people feel like giving up sometimes.
But—those who are wise keep watching.
Those who are wise—with a wisdom born of hope and promise—
keep watching. They keep looking
for a sign that tells them God is here.
And when the sign comes,
these wise ones are ready to travel.
I don't mean only that they've got their toothbrushes packed
or that they've arranged for someone to pick up their mail.
The wise ones are ready in more significant ways:
they are setting out on this journey

with a particular kind of determination and intention.
This is not a fun-in-the-sun kind of trip.
This is a journey to which they are called
by a voice that stirs them deep, deep inside
and beckons them to something holy and profound
and utterly life-changing.

We know this
because the story tells us that they travel with gifts.
Special gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
Gifts with meaning, gifts bought and wrapped with care,
gifts prepared for the One not even found yet,
gifts that speak of anticipation and hope.

I wonder if the wise ones knew what they would discover
when they arrived in Bethlehem.
I wonder if, in all their dreaming,
in all their waiting and watching,
they had even an inkling of what it might mean
when God comes to this world as Emmanuel.
I wonder if they were surprised, shocked even,
to find not a regal young prince surrounded by servants
but a little boy in a simple shirt sitting on his mother's lap.

The story doesn't tell us.
The story only tells us
that the wise ones were overwhelmed with joy
when they arrived at the place where Jesus was.
And the story tells us that they knelt before the child
and opened their gifts
to offer them to this One who is God's word to us.

The gifts of the wise ones—
gifts that speak of how God comes to be with us...

Like the magi, we too travel with gifts—
gifts that speak of how we experience God-with-us.

First: the gift of gold.

Sing with me if you remember the words—
*Born a king on Bethlehem's plain;
gold I bring to crown him again—
king forever, ceasing never
over us all to reign.*

In Christ, God comes to us as king, as ruler.

Not in the way of the world, of course,
but as the servant-king:
humble, and yet with authority
compassionate, and yet challenging
serving and yet calling us to service.

The king demands our loyalty

and our commitment to the Way of the kingdom.

And so we bring our gifts of gold—our service in the kingdom:

our time, our treasure, our talent.

We commit ourselves to faithful sharing of our resources

with one another as faith family

and with others outside this church community.

Through our offerings of money,

we support the work and ministry of St Andrew's

and the work of the United Church's Mission & Service Fund.

We share in the committee work that organizes our congregational life—

the finances, the fellowship, the worship,

the faith formation and education, the care and oversight of property,

the outreach, the decision-making, the administration, the stewardship.

Gold we bring.

And then there is the gift of frankincense.

Frankincense for the One who comes to us from God,

the One who is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Frankincense to offer have I;

incense owns a deity nigh.

Prayer and praising all men raising,

worship him God most high.

Jesus as Christ-Child. A deity nigh.

The Holy One here with us.

The gift of incense is our worship.

It is all the things we do and say

that express the ways in which we encounter the sacred,

the ways we celebrate God's presence,

the ways we love the One who first loved us.

Our gift of incense includes things like gathering for worship,

singing and praying and proclaiming our faith.

And stargazing!

The gift of incense includes gathering around the font

to welcome others into this circle of grace.

It includes sharing the bread and the cup

at this table of fellowship and feasting.

It can include sharing in worship leadership,

serving at Out-of-the-Cold,

joining others in ecumenical worship,

reading and telling the scripture stories...

Frankincense is ours to offer.

And myrrh. Myrrh that speaks to us of the painful face of love,

the unavoidable reality of suffering.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume

breathes a life of gathering gloom—

sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,

sealed in a stone-cold tomb.

What kind of gift is this to bring:

myrrh as a prophetic word of suffering yet to some?

Myrrh is bitter to the taste.

Like hardship and suffering and dying.

Our instinct is to shrink away from it.

Its darkness contrasts sharply with the brightness of all our golden gifts.

And yet—

when we bring myrrh into the places of sickness and suffering and loss,

it releases its fragrance and begins to do its healing work.

We bring our myrrh when we do not shy away from suffering.

When we are willing to go into the dark and lonely places,

the shadow places where people are hurting;
when we weep with those who weep,
when we can only sit and hold a hand
 because we are helpless to find any more words to say;
when we lift our voices in lament and
when we shake our fist at heaven and cry out,
 How long, O God, how long?

Myrrh is the gift that says, You are not alone.

Myrrh reminds us that Christ makes God's love known to us
 by entering into our suffering,
 by sharing our humanity.

And then we share that solidarity with *our* sisters and brothers.

That's how the love is passed on.

It's not easy. It can hurt like the devil.

But, in the doing of it, a beautiful thing happens—

 rising up out of the ashes of self-giving love,

 the dream starts to come to life:

 the alleluia-life that is God's gift to us.

Glorious now behold him arise:

king and God and sacrifice!

Alleluia! Alleluia! earth to the heavens replies!

O star of wonder, star of night,

star with royal beauty bright,

westward leading, still proceeding,

guide us to thy perfect Light!

May we be wise ones.

May we wait and watch and spy out the signs of God-with-us.

May we choose our gifts with care

 and carry them with us on the journey

 ready to unwrap and offer them.