



“The Un-Named Gift”

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

The Christmas season has come to its end. What began back in November with the First Sunday in Advent, then moved to the celebration of Christmas, comes to its conclusion with the celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany. Now, if you are a liturgical stickler, Epiphany – the twelfth day of Christmas – was Friday, January 6. But the chances of getting any of us to a service on a Friday are pretty slim. So, we’re a bit late, but here we are. We’re celebrating Epiphany.

At the center of the celebration is the story of the Wise Men who search for the newborn King. Matthew is the only gospel that has the story and it is a strange story. First, we don’t know how many wise men there were. Tradition has assumed three, simply because three gifts are mentioned. There could have been more. There could have been less. Second, they were not kings. The carol helped muddy those waters. They were astrologers and scientists and sages. Third, the star they followed apparently moved. Stars typically don’t do that. Stars are fixed points in the sky by which we can navigate, but this star apparently moved through the night sky, suggesting a supernova that slowly burned out, or even Haley’s Comet, which would have appeared in 12 BC. Fourth and perhaps most importantly, we have a power-hungry ruler who felt threatened by nearly anything, including the birth of a child. I’m speaking of Herod, the Roman puppet ruler of Palestine. He felt so endangered by the object of the wise men’s search that he ordered the extermination of all infants less than two years old, in order to maintain his hold on power. And so it goes.

It's a strange story. We don't know if it all happened exactly as it is described. Frankly, we don't know if it happened at all. But we have the story and it asks for our consideration. Why was this story told and why was it told in the manner in which we have received it? And what does it have to do with our discipleship in 2017?

When you look carefully at the story, there is a word that keeps popping up. It's a word we don't use much in our everyday language. It's a word we don't even think much about. But in the course of the story of the wise men from Matthew's gospel, it is used three times in the narrative. Can you find it? Look for it in your printed text. The word is "homage."

When you look at the story in the original language, the word we're translating "homage" is a word that means to fall prostrate before another. It's about posture. The word means to lie flat on your face before one who alone is worthy of worship, reverence, and adoration. It is an acknowledgement that there is one who is greater than all – including yourself.

We tend to get wrapped up in the gifts the wise men brought. We're all about the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But that is to become distracted. We have over-mythologized and over-symbolized the gifts.

The true gift – the unnamed gift – of the story of the wise men is their desire and their willingness to acknowledge this infant as being worthy of worship, reverence, and adoration. The true gift – the unnamed gift – is the desire of the wise men to fall on their faces before a child who would be greater than any of the wisest ever born.

And there might be the lesson we need to take from the Epiphany story this year. Maybe the lesson for us is that we need to be sure that we are offering this unnamed gift to our God in the year ahead. Maybe we need to be reminded that while there are other people and things that will solicit our worship and adoration, there is only one who is truly worthy to receive it.

I don't talk much about John Calvin. I probably should, but there's so much misunderstanding about Calvin, that I would spend most of my time clarifying what he said. But on this particular subject Calvin was dead on. Calvin reminded us over and over of just how easy it is to make anything an idol – or a little god. He knew that we could make idols of dastardly things and that we could make idols of noble things and idols of everything in between. He knew how incredibly easy it is to allow other things to take the place that should be reserved in our lives for God alone.

There are so many things that would claim God's place in our lives. There are so many who would ask to be the god of our life, who are not worthy of the claim. There are so many things that work their way in between us and those we love and between us and God. There are so very many people and things that want to be the idol at the center of our lives and receive the worship, reverence, and adoration that belong to God alone.

But that relationship is reserved for only One. Only God can have the central place in our lives. The first commandment reminds us: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." And the second commandment makes it even clearer: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

My intuition tells me that in the year ahead there will be those who will claim that they should have God's place in our lives. My hunch is that there will be voices and things that will try to lure us into giving them pride of place in our lives. I feel confident in saying that because it has always been true. But, in these strange times, there will be insidious and subtle requests for our allegiance and commitment that will challenge God's authority.

Perhaps the lesson for this Epiphany season is to be more deeply committed than ever before to giving the unnamed gift of our worship, reverence, and adoration to God and to God alone.

The wise men found the object of their searching. They found God-in-flesh and fell on their faces before him. And once they had offered that unnamed gift, they found their other gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That's the right order. The heart leads the way and the hands follow.

Our worship of God and God alone is the unnamed gift. Everything else finds its place after that.

Christina Rosetti's poem still rings true:

"What can I give Him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb,

If I were a wise man I would do my part.

Yet what can I give Him? Give my heart."

"Give my heart." The unnamed gift. For now and evermore. Amen.



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