

Three Wise Gifts

Matthew 2:1-12

If the stories of Christmas had been written by a woman, I'm quite certain they would have looked a bit different. At the very least they may have made sense to a maternal mind.

From the outset, most women would agree, there is no way Mary's pregnancy wouldn't have been the talk of the town and the focus of her family in the months leading up to the delivery date. A pregnancy in a small town, for whatever reason, is public knowledge and the subject of more than a few conversations, especially if it involves a young woman and the father is unknown. Obviously, the Gospel writers missed that.

Furthermore, in most cases, grandparents would have been all over this, especially since it's fair to assume this would have been their first grandchild. Long before Mary and Joseph would have been planning for the day, Mary's mother, Anna, would have been announcing it to relatives and neighbors (we all know, if a Jewish grandmother thought her grandchild was going to be the messiah—“*ay-yay-yay! I am ver clepmt!*”). At the very least, you can be sure she would have been making baby clothes for months and nagging her carpenter son-in-law to build a nice cradle for the baby (I can hear her now, “Yosef, don't be a such a *putz!* You can do better than this *schlock!*”). In other words, no parent or grandparent worth their salt would have let this event occur with little fanfare or preparation.

Then, a woman wouldn't have written into the storyline a journey from Nazareth when she's about to go into labor! Even if that had happened, what family or household in Bethlehem wouldn't have

the decency to kick the kids out to make room for a mother in labor? Do you think a woman would have placed an expectant mother in a stable? Giving birth is hard enough without schlepping through cow dung. A woman never would have put Mary through such indignity! Frankly, instead of shepherds running in from the fields, if a woman had written this, all the mothers and grandmothers in the village would have rushed over to help out poor Mary in her pain. *Oy-vey!*

Finally, what mother-loving woman would have written about foreign astrologers/magi/kings coming to the house offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh? From a woman's perspective, instead of Magi it would have been an endless run of friends and relatives from the extended family bearing gifts of diapers, lox and bagels from the local deli to feed everyone, and passing out dreidels for the kids! That's the way it happens in real life! Clearly, it was men who wrote these stories who knew absolutely nothing about delivering Jewish babies! It's just goes to show, unlike what the Good Book says, men aren't so wise after all!

Seriously, I do find it interesting how well this story is known and yet how little we examine it for its incongruities and inconsistencies with what would have been expected at the time and what is being projected upon our imagination centuries later as to what occurred. Just from our text for today, we assume there were three wise men, when in fact nothing is said about the number of magi (there could have been six, eight, ten, or twelve, just like we have at the children's service on Christmas Eve!). Tradition tells us they were kings, whereas the story makes no such claim and simply states that they were wise men, which presumably meant astrologers,

if they were reading the stars. Nor did they arrive at a stable according to Matthew, but to a house in Bethlehem—the place where the writer assumes they were all along (Matthew doesn't have them go to Nazareth until after they return from Egypt).

So it makes you wonder, when it comes to the gifts that the Magi offered—gold, frankincense and myrrh—why would Matthew have identified them as such? Why not leave this detail out altogether or have them bring something else? Why two types of incense and a pot of gold for a newborn? What would have been the significance of these three as gifts?

We can only speculate, to be sure, but since Matthew liked to allude to passages in the Hebrew Prophets, particularly Isaiah, it's not coincidental that in Isaiah 60, we read about gold and frankincense being brought by foreigners from Persia who, as representatives of Cyrus, flocked to Jerusalem upon its rebuilding after the Babylonian exile, offering gifts as diplomatic overtures in support and recognition of Israel's reconstitution. We heard these words cited earlier:

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
The young camels of Midian and Ephah;
All those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
And shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. (Isaiah 60:6)

In other words, at a critical juncture in the post-exilic restoration of Israel, gold and frankincense served as symbols of the rest of the world paying homage to their nation's rebirth. Hence, for Matthew, it would mean the same in his telling of the birth of the Christ Child—Israel was being reborn in the birth of Jesus.

But then, where does myrrh come into the mix, since it would have been sufficient for Matthew to reference only the first two gifts

to make this point? Why include myrrh as an additional gift? It's hard to say, since there are no direct references, though there are several possibilities.

Myrrh, like frankincense, is a resin made into fragrant incense, used since the beginnings of civilization. It was widely traded throughout the ancient empires in the Middle East. In Egypt it served as a perfume and also to prepare the dead for mummification. Some of the biblical references include Exodus 30, where Moses used liquid myrrh, along with other incense, to anoint the Ark of the Covenant as well as the altar upon which the atonement would be made; in other words, the sacred elements that symbolized God's presence in their lives were ritually blessed with myrrh.

In the Song of Solomon, there is an altogether different image. There, myrrh is frequently associated with frankincense as part of the lover's seductive fragrances—the indulgence of romance between two in love. Much like Chanel 5, myrrh was used by women to entice a lover.

Yet, in the Gospels, myrrh is associated not with love, but with Jesus' death. Mark mentions myrrh being mixed with vinegar and offered to Jesus on the cross; John has Nicodemus bringing it along with other spices to prepare Jesus for burial.

So there are many possibilities for why Matthew chose to include myrrh as a gift from the Magi, but nothing definitive. We can only surmise that Matthew could have had all these thoughts in mind: perhaps for the one in whom God's presence would be made known, or the one who would entice humanity to reunite with God through love, or the one who would represent the grace that comes through an

atonement for human sin, myrrh may have been Matthew's way to symbolize, if not foreshadow, the Gospel's message. With his choice of the three gifts, Matthew was able to represent the entire canon of Scripture. They were, then, more than gifts from wise men, they were three wise gifts to humanity.

The spiritual intention behind these three wise gifts has led me to ponder the whole matter and idea of gift-giving. Why is it we offer and receive gifts, not only at Christmas, but at other times as well? What is being conveyed in the giving and receiving of gifts?

I suppose tradition has a lot to do with it (e.g., birthdays, Christmas, etc.), as does practicality and need. But underlying all of our gifts, isn't it because of the relationship between the giver and the receiver? We don't hand out gifts to strangers very often—to those we don't know or with whom we have no relationship, but we go out of our way often to get just the right present for someone we love and care about. The point being, there's an intentionality about gift-giving that reflects the depth and degree of the relationship. It's a way of expressing gratitude for the person and for the tie that binds you together.

Yet, even with that being said, material gifts can only be symbols in their own right. Much like the gifts of the magi, they are meant to suggest many things about a relationship—how close one is, how much a person means to another, how much one will sacrifice for another, and so forth. It's awkward to give a gift when the feelings are not reciprocated or the recipient only feels an obligation to express gratitude. The best and wisest gifts are those that satisfy the hearts of

both the giver and receiver and are meant to express love that is mutually shared.

This sense of reciprocal love may be one important explanation for why the theology of Christmas touches our hearts as human beings, perhaps even more than what we experience at Easter. The Gospel message of the resurrection from the dead is good news, to be sure, but does it impact us nearly as much as does the Gospel's sense of love?

In the Christmas story, we are able to appreciate the gift that life is and how love is expressed through the caring of another. We understand the intimacy of human love and the hardships of human suffering that give birth to hope in the delivery of a child, more than we resonate with the Easter hope which arises after death. We more easily identify with and embrace the nativity of the Christ Child than we do the resurrection of the Risen Lord. The Christmas story is closer to the human story that expresses love through a mother's womb more than through an empty tomb.

This may be why we consider gift-giving so integral to our experience of Christmas. The material objects we purchase and offer serve to represent what we value most of all, which is, love expressed in human relationships, at any age and stage of life. Though we can give without loving, as Amy Carmichael once said, we cannot love without giving. The act of giving to another is an expression of love. In whatever way we can express love through giving, that is when these gifts become the wisest ones of all.

One of my favorite stories in this season is O. Henry's tale of the Gift of the Magi. I'm sure you know it well. It's the story of James

Dillingham Young and his wife, Della, who in their poverty had little in the way of funds to buy each other a Christmas present. However, each had a treasure of their own—Jim a prized pocket watch that had been his father's and grandfather's. Della had her hair. As O. Henry tells it:

Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out of the window someday to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

As the story goes, Jim wanted to purchase beautiful combs that could adorn Della's hair. Della, in her daydreams, wanted to buy the platinum chain she spied in a jeweler's window for The Watch. Yet, each lacked sufficient funds to buy the gift that would be perfect for the other.

As you know, this is where the poignant beauty of the story comes through. Out of love for her husband, Della had her long, beautiful tresses cut off and sold in order to buy the watch chain. At the same time, Jim went and sold his watch in order to buy the tortoise shell combs for his beloved wife. Each sacrificed their most prized possession to express the love they had for the other. As O. Henry finishes his tale:

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

And that is what we discover each time we sacrifice out of love for another, just like the story of Christmas. This is why this season is the holiest and most blessed time of year, for the gifts we give and receive are the expressions of love from our hearts that bind us together with God. And when we give to another out of love, when we sacrifice something of ourselves for another, then we are the wisest—we are the Magi.

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