

“Keeping by Giving”  
Psalm 72:10-15, Matthew 2:1-12  
December 29, 2019

Now the urgency of the Christmas story is past us. We have heard how the shepherds came with haste to Bethlehem, running from their fields and sheep, to see the gift of God. We recall the imperative of the command by Caesar Augustus that all persons should return to their ancestral home to be taxed. And so a woman about to give birth had to undertake a hazardous trip - right away.

But now matters can settle back a bit, for it will take the wise men from the East many months, if not years, to make the journey from their homeland to Bethlehem.

Some of us are pretty good when it comes to the short bursts of energy like those that overtook shepherds and the Holy Family just before Christmas. Like them, some of us work well under the pressure of a deadline, and are eager to get a task over and done with quickly. But when it comes to persevering over the long haul, our energies might begin to flag, our confidence erodes, and we risk losing interest. Some of us would make better shepherds, dashing from the fields to the stable’s manger, rather than Wise Men, undertaking the journey of a lifetime to a strange little town in an unknown land.

Let’s look at this difference another way. It was once said that some who are able to stand up against the spectacular danger and the exciting crisis fail utterly when it is a matter of being faithful when no trumpets are blowing. It would have been hard, even as the most unbelieving or cynical shepherd, to ignore an angelic chorus proclaiming great joy. But what if in the great silence and blackness of eternity a single, lone sign appeared in the heavens? What if it beckoned, not with words that humans can understand, but with little more than an eerie glow?

That kind of sign could easily have been dismissed by most of us. After all, we would only see it at night, and most of us are asleep then, or at least indoors with the shades drawn and the shutters closed against the winter chill.

We might never have noticed it at all, thinking the stars might be particularly bright one night, and shrugging it off at that. Who could know whether God had anything to do with that star, anyway? And even if He did, is the sign for us? And even it is IS for us, God still gives us the freedom, either to journey in its light, or to stay behind, left in our own darkness.

Indeed, some of us are NOT very good over the long haul. We need the shock of a catastrophe to get us to move on a long journey that we really might not want to make. We need the message to come through loud and clear, like a sledgehammer, because the silence of a still, small voice seems so lost in this world of ours.

Let me bring us into our own realm of today to try to make this a bit more clear. Just about everyone who has not had their head in the sand for the last generation has recognized that our society is in need of some kind of mid-course correction, if not a fundamental overhaul. The warnings, the signs, were unmistakable: the decline of respect for those who do not think like we do, the lack of civility from people who disagree with us - are well known.

But those signs have been creeping up on us over decades, the roots of which were seen and experienced by some of us in the 1960's. But as we face a new year, the turmoil in our body politic has awakened some of us to finally take notice, whether it was an unexpected election result, or an unprecedented impeachment. Yet I suspect that no matter how these two particular crises are resolved, we will still be left with the reality of a society profoundly at odds with itself.

Maybe that is why the wisemen were called wise. Even though they saw no clear and present danger, they still acted. Even though there was no urgent angelic chorus telling them to go, they went. Even though few others would understand why they were going, or were clear on where they were off to, they set out. And when they did set out, they did not leave their homeland unprepared.

There is an old saying from scripture that much will be required from those who have much. Aside from the fact that this could have been a hidden prophecy about the progressive income tax, I think it does point out a truth that things are not to be acquired for the sake of having them, but for the sake of using them. And when we do not put to good use what has been put in our charge, we are not only wasting, but are actually perverting, the divine intent. Let me try to illustrate, using the three gifts of the wisemen:

Just about everybody knows the verse from the book of Proverbs that states: the love of money is the root of all evil. And that truth really needs very little translation given the common experience of people everywhere. What scripture is really trying to point out is that there is a danger when our livelihood threatens to usurp the place of life itself. Means should not become the ends, because what we do should not become more important than what we are. We are not to become defined by our pursuits and busyness, but by our qualities, our character, and our spirit.

And so the wisemen offered up and gave away their gold, their livelihood, so that they might have life, so that their own life might be more abundant, so that their life might beget new life in others. They would keep, by giving.

Frankincense is not as current as gold is in our modern age. Rarely is worship filled with incense, even in the Catholic and Episcopal churches, which do still use it on occasion. But think about worship. What is its point? What is it done for? If we do not worship, there is a danger of spiritual pride, or of arrogance. If we do not acknowledge the importance, or even the existence, of anything outside of ourselves that should be revered, then we are in danger indeed of self-centeredness, selfishness, and a lack of sensitivity.

And so just as gold had to be offered up in order to safeguard the spiritual health of the giver, so too much worship be made. For by keeping either of them, we stand to lose much. Only by giving them can we keep something even more precious.

Finally, there is myrrh. If you recall the relevant verse of “We Three Kings,” you will know that myrrh is a bitter perfume. In fact, the word myrrh, in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, literally means “bitter.” Now whereas gold and frankincense obviously have some value that just about everyone can recognize, the value of bitterness is perhaps not so self-evident. And yet many people hoard their bitterness as if it were even more precious than gold itself. I sometimes get the impression that here in the early 21st century a lot of people actually enjoy being upset, agitated, angry, cranky, and bitter. Maybe it’s because they have been that way for so long they don’t know any other way to be. And we in the church are not exempt, either. To see some of the righteous, or should I say, the self-righteous indignation that passes for true religion in some quarters - though perhaps here in Colebrook we are curiously exempt - you might wonder if the Christmas angels sang of “contention on earth, and antagonism toward men.”

The wisemen recognized that even their bitterness had to be turned over and delivered to the Most High, so they might be refined and purified, cleansed from their shortcomings, just as they had to be relieved of their material burdens and prideful arrogance. It dawned upon the wisemen that in order to keep what was of true value, they had to give up things that might have seemed valuable, but really were only there to be given away.

That is what keeping Christmas is all about. It is giving - of what is less than noble in yourself, so that you might be made children of God; giving - of worship and reverence, so that as a child of God you might come into God’s presence; giving - of your material value, so that you might make more room in your life for God’s own Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: