

“Give More” Matthew 2:1-12

No nativity set is complete unless three “larger than life” figures appear near the manger. Two are typically off to the side (usually behind the lone sheep) and one with head bowed and on one knee (like a young man proposing to his new bride) is close to the manger. No Sunday-School pageant is complete unless three boys awkwardly make their way down the middle aisle of the church to drop three, dollar store boxes at the foot of the crèche. And no “Christmas Songbook” is complete until (usually close to the end – if not the final song) we read or sing, “We three kings of orient are...” Often we cannot even agree on their titles. Are they kings? Are they astrologers? Are they magicians? Are they magi? The latter is the best descriptor, if we want to know Matthew’s original intent. The Greek word used in Matthew 2 is actually “magi,” but then again “magi” were understood by the people of the day as those who were “kings, astrologers and magicians”. So maybe the most prominent thing we can agree upon, when it comes to those who came to bring gifts to Jesus, was that they were (as good Maritimers like say) “from away” or as Matthew writes, “from the east” which implies they were not “local,” and not “just east of Bethlehem. We know that much for sure but with the story peculiar to Matthew we have no other Biblical writings of which to compare or contrast. The only way then to “expand” our story beyond just the twelve verses I read to you, is to go “outside” the Biblical text, which many have done.

Myron Augsburger, for example, writes, “It is believed the magi came from Persia and were a tribe of priests”. Herodotus says, “the magi were originally a tribe of Medians who had tried to overthrow the Persian Empire and failed but still, because of their learning, became teachers of science, astrology and philosophy to the kings”. Some tradition even go as far as naming the magi as “Casper (or Gaspar) Melchoir and Balthsazzar.” Marco Polo Marco... Polo... Marco... Pollo... (I’ve always wanted to do that in church) even goes further telling us the “name of the town where the magi’s journey supposedly originated”. And still others, according to historians like William Barclay, do not just give names but describe each of the men in detail (right down to the amount of facial hair each had). For example, “Melchoir was “believed” to be the King of Persia. He was described by outside sources as an old, grey haired man with a long beard and was the giver of the gold. Casper (or Gaspar) was supposedly King of India and was a young beardless man, ruddy in countenance and brought the gift of frankincense. And finally there was Balthsazzar, King of Arabia, who was swarthy (I always though this was a pirarty word but in truth means “a man with dark skin”) and his beard was newly grown and was the giver of myhrr”. All these many details may or may not be true, but not told by Matthew but Matthew does tell us the gifts that were brought.

The gifts are not and were not even then, typical baby welcome gifts but they do hold great symbolism for this “no so typical” baby. First, we are told that “gold” was given to Jesus. I guess if “diamonds are a girl’s best friend” then maybe “gold is a boy’s best friend?” Gold was, and still a commercial commodity and was a gift that would have been extremely practical, if the magi showed up as “late to the party,” as we think they may have. I say “practical” because gold could have been used to help (as we will learn next Sunday) Joseph and his family in their forced move to Egypt for a time. But it’s not so much about using the gift of gold to “get something” for Matthew as it is about what the gift of gold represents. During this period it would be common for “kings” to give “other” kings gold as a sign of respect and honour. Gold was not a gift for commoners (like you and me) but a gift for royalty, like “King Jesus”. The next gift brought to Jesus by the magi was frankincense. If gold was a gift for a king, frankincense was a gift for a priest. Frankincense was an oil used in the temple and primarily used by the priest. When blended together with the meal offering frankincense was also used by the priest on behalf of the people for offering thanks and praise to God. It is interesting to note that incense was never mixed with the sin offerings. In other words, although used at the temple frankincense did not represent sin but prayer and praise. And finally the gift of myrrh was given to Jesus. Although gold and frankincense were “odd” children gifts, myrrh is even stranger, because myrrh was a something used on those who were going to die. Death, of course, is not something any mother wants to be told or any father wants to be reminded of, when it comes to their children. Yes, life is fragile, but mostly fragile for those who have lived a good, long life and not a child who has their whole life ahead of them. Like frankincense myrrh also has an interesting footnote because myrrh as an “embalming” fluid is not the only use of this oil. Myrrh was also what was offered to Jesus (mixed with wine) as he hung on the cross to “dull his pain” but Jesus refused. We are left wondering what Mary and Joseph thought when these “strangers from afar” made their way to see their Son. Did they understand the full extent of the visit or the gifts and what they meant or was it similar to maybe your Mom or Dad telling their wealthy, childless brother or sister to not spend so much on you at Christmas – so as not to spoil you. Or, even at this baby’s early age did Mary and Joseph understand the reality of who their baby was and whom they were entrusted to care for? A gift for a King. A gift for a Priest. And a gift for someone who was going to die. Not until 30 or so years later do we realize how truly appropriate these gifts were as Jesus King of Heaven, the High Priest who intercedes for us and the One who would die for the sins of the world.

What is not apparent in our reading but also not necessarily something we learn from outside the text but within (but we need to look closely) is that the journey of the magi took some time, for they arrived at the “home” and not the “manger” to see the “child” and not the “baby.” The

magi persevered in their journey and we can assume endured hardships on the way to bring their gifts and “worship” to the One they had apparently heard about to travel so far. We cannot assume they were men of faith but still men who believed what had happened in Bethlehem was not simply foretold but a moment in time that could change the course of history. So they came, came to worship, which may sound like they were or were going to be believers but “worship” within Matthew use of the word, is the same word used of someone paying homage to another human being – as kings would do for one another. This idea of worship is again reinforced when Herod told the magi how he wanted them to find the Christ-child so he could also worship Him. But what we do know of Herod (both Biblically and traditionally) is worship of Jesus could not be any further from the truth because of Herod’s opposition and suspicion of anyone, including a baby, who he believed threatened his kingship. We need only to read on in our text to know this is true. But in reading on we also see, by the magi’s action that they didn’t believe Herod either. As quickly as the magi came on the scene, they left almost as quickly because they had done what they had set out to do: “give more” to Jesus.

But what I find most interesting is that in the earliest eastern tradition there was in fact mention that there were actually “12 magi and not just 3”. Later history tells us there were only 3 and this is what we typically stick with even though Matthew does not name or number the magi. Most “justify” 3 magi by pointing out the fact there were 3 gifts as if each brought a gift - one gift per person. I’m not here to deny or validate that belief, other than to say, “I’ve gone to a lot of parties and on more than occasion forgotten to bring the host a gift – I’m just saying. But what I do like about this idea is that no matter the number I would like to suggest that each brought something to Jesus that day, as do you and I, even this morning. Allow me to explain. Sometimes, no most of the time, we believe the only thing we have to give when it comes to gifts, are tangible things. You’re invited to supper you bring a bottle of wine. It’s Christmas and you buy presents. And if the “supper” is at your boss’ you bring a “nice” bottle of wine. If it’s Christmas and you have kids, you need to “show them how much you love them” so you go overboard and buy “big.” So at first glance we believe the magi reinforced such a truth for look at the gifts they brought! But is that really the lesson of the magi? And what if, (just dream with me for a second) what if there were more than 3 magi? Do you think it would have been like when the MacLeod’s (I mean the family I grew up in made up of Mom, Dad and 4 boys) went for supper but shared the gift the host would have been disappointed because there were 6 of us but only one gift? Or is it not so much about the present as it is about the presence? The magi came. That’s the real lesson of our story. If they were, as we think - that is wise, prominent and wealthy could they have not sent someone else to

deliver their gift in their stead? Of course they could have. But they didn't. Instead they went because their presence meant more than their presents.

Could this then be the "thing" that could make Christmas meaningful again? What if we conspired as a church, as couples, as families, as individuals to not get caught up in spending more but giving more – as in giving more presence than presents, giving more time rather than things, giving more to those in need rather than those who simply want. Like being "present" with the Sumner family. This Advent we are encouraging you to spend less so that you can give more to one family. One family who has known loss more than many of us will ever know. They've had to bury a child - which may just be the most unnatural thing any of us would ever do. But to "help" means changing a few things in our own lives. It could mean buying one less, useless, un-needed gift for that someone we love but who doesn't really need yet another gift. Or maybe it means spending a little less on all those we love. It could even mean making a homemade gift or two or three to save more (which people will love even more than that sweater that will put in their closet and not wear and later re-gift or given to Value Village,[™] so that we can "afford" to "give more" to the Sumner family. Most of us I know cannot simply give more without doing one or more of these things because none of us can afford to go in even more debt. So I suppose what I am asking is that we live simpler lives, spend less or live on less so that when opportunities like this arise we can be generous and make a difference. But if you can't give financially, that's ok too. Some of us simply can't "give more," financially. But you could still pray, right? You could maybe send a note or make cookies for the Sumner's or another family, another co-worker, a sponsored child across the world or that stranger on the street or the person getting a coffee behind you at McDonald's because presence is more important than presents – if you "really" want to conspire to make Christmas meaningful again. Let us pray...