

“Gifted”

Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon by Jan Edmiston – Fairlington Presbyterian Church
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Even people who don't think they know much about the Bible have heard of the Three Wise Men. Some call them “magi” and some call them kings. But all Matthew tells us is that they were “wise men from the east.”¹

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Apparently they carried treasure chests and they were very spiritual people – in touch with their dreams and astronomy. They went to Jerusalem – the holiest city of the Jews (both then and now) believing that someone in Jerusalem would surely know: “*Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*”

There was also someone else living in this holy city for whom this would be a very disturbing question because he called *himself* the King of the Jews. Of course, I'm talking about Herod – who was known as “The Great.”

Herod the Great decided that he would also like to know the answer to that question - where this so-called new king might be found. And so he called together the holy men of the temple – the scribes and chief priests who would know.

[As Matt Pritchard mentioned last Sunday, Herod the Great was ostensibly Jewish, but this passage proves he wasn't much of a student of his own faith. Otherwise, he would have been familiar with the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures that say that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem.²]

These men weren't called “wise” for nothing. After being told that the king of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem, the wise men from the east found the baby – *again, following a star*. He was with his mother. And they opened their treasure chests and offered him three gifts:

Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh.

Notice, it doesn't say anywhere that there were three wise men; only three gifts. We've always assumed that three gifts = three gift-bearers. But we just don't know. ³
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¹ The Greek word for “wise men” is the same word otherwise translated “sorcerers” as in Acts 13 (Elymas the sorcerer) and in Acts 8 (Simon Magus).

² Micah 5:2 is quoted in this scripture passage in Matthew 2.

³ We also don't know their names or nationalities. Western tradition – since the 8th century - has claimed they were named Caspar (or Gaspar), Melchior, and Balthasar. In Ethiopian tradition, they are known as Hor, Karsudan, and Basanater and In Armenian tradition, they are called Kagbha, Badadakharida, and Badadilma. Also, Marco Polo claimed that he found their graves just south of Tehran.

Gold. Frankincense. And myrrh. These were useless gifts if you were a poor carpenter. But clearly, there was something the wise men knew about this poor child that most people would not know. These gifts had a special meaning.

They were the gifts you would give to a king.

Gold was the material of crowns and scepters.

Frankincense was an expensive perfume. (Most people didn't smell very pleasant in those days. But royalty was different; royalty was expected to smell goods they wore perfume.)

And myrrh was commonly used for anointing ceremonies.

Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh.

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These gifts are also considered *prophetic*.

Again, gold symbolized royalty.

Frankincense symbolized the priesthood.

And myrrh was often used for embalming.

In other words . . . this would be *an earthly king* and *a royal priest*, who would also *die a human death*.

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Most babies today are showered with gifts, but they are usually onesies and car seats. Nevertheless - even today's infant is sometimes given a prophetic gift, or at least a hopeful gift that seems very impractical:

- Maybe a silver spoon in hopes of lifelong prosperity
- Maybe a Bible in hopes of faith
- Maybe a tiny pair of Nikes in hopes of great athletic prowess – or because ... let's face it: those tiny sneakers are extremely cute.

No newborn really needs a silver spoon, or *any* spoon at that point. No baby can read a Bible of course. No newborn needs shoes, especially expensive sneakers. But we have great hopes for the babies and children of our lives.

There were great hopes for Jesus too. At this point in his life, only a handful of people was aware of who he really was. Mary knew. And her relative Elizabeth knew. The wise men, it seems, also knew.

This child was special. This child was gifted in a way that no other baby has been gifted before or since.

And while *we* were not born with the same gifts as the Christ child, it's still true that **God** *has gifted us as well*. Like Jesus, we are gifted for ministry – every one of us.

When we look at a new baby, it's impossible to know what God has endowed to that child. Maybe her fingers are long and we imagine she might be born to be a dentist or a piano player. Maybe he has a look of concentration at an early age, and we imagine he's called to be a great thinker – but we can't know for sure how God has gifted that child.

When we baptize children, we promise to help raise them in faith. And this includes watching them and knowing them well enough to help them figure out what gifts *they* have been given. The apostle Paul wrote that all of us have been given gifts for ministry.⁴ In other words, our inherent gifts are not just for us.

Let me say that again:

All of us have been given gifts for ministry.

And those gifts are to be used for the good of the world God has made.

Jesus had a special and unique role, and he was and always will be the one and only King. *But he was never intended to be the only priest.*

In baptism, all of us are anointed to serve. We are a priesthood of all believers.⁵

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As some of you know, my husband is also a professional minister. And when he was about 11 years old, an Episcopal priest who was a family friend told him that he'd noticed that there was something about Fred that made him wonder if maybe Fred might consider one day study professional ministry.

At the age of eleven, the last thing on Fred's mind was graduate school, but this family friend planted a seed that grew as the years went on.

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I know another person who – as a 5th grader – was told she was a pretty good writer. She was mortified when others read her writing, but one day, the cool girl sitting next to her – who was an excellent artist – suggested that one day they might write a book together. She has never forgotten this, and it helped her figure out what her life's calling might be. Just one person noticing a gift and saying something about it can change everything.

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But we live in a culture that seems to be hesitant - not only to articulate to kids what *their specific gifts are* – but also to share what is *not* their gift in a loving way. We give trophies

⁴ Romans 12:4-6

⁵ 1 Peter 2

to everybody for simply participating. We place children in classes for “the gifted and talented” while trying not to limit what those gifts and talents might be.

But this seems unbiblical, especially as young people come into their own and mature. Paul wrote on more than one occasion that different people have different gifts, and this is something to be celebrated!

Just as the wise men discerned that Jesus – *from birth* - was born to rule, anointed to serve, and destined to die a human death, we are called

- to help each other discern what *we* were born to do,
- to hold each other accountable to be what God has anointed us to *be*,
- to offer to each other what we are destined to *do*.

And I’m not just talking about *our life’s paid work* necessarily. I’m talking about our service in the kingdom of God on earth. Sometimes we are paid and sometimes we aren’t paid to do God’s work.

I feel very blessed to be paid to do what I love to do, what I know God has called me to do. During and after college, there were people who would randomly tell me that I seemed to have gifts in preaching and teaching the Bible. And these gifts have been affirmed over the years.

Along the same lines, a few brave souls have also told me what I’m *not* gifted to do. For example, I’m not much of a singer. Once I was singing my heart out in worship, but apparently, I was standing too close to one of the mikes up here, and afterwards, a thoughtful person shared that I needed to take a step back away from the microphone. This would make worship much more meaningful for the rest of the people here. My singing would not be as much of a distraction. While that hurt a little at first hearing, I actually appreciated it eventually. If we are truly interested in “growing the church” spiritually, why would we want to do anything that might hinder that growth?

Maybe you are wondering what God is calling you to be, what you were born to do. This is how it works:

We get excited about something. A passion is stirred within us. We find ourselves thinking about a vision, imagining something that inspires us.

- Maybe it’s teaching people English as a second language.
- Maybe it’s reaching out to Muslim neighbors.
- Maybe it’s leading a small group of teen-aged girls.
- Maybe it’s organizing files.
- Maybe it’s freshening an office with new paint.

Something stirs within us, but – here’s the confirmation: *others also notice that we are gifted to serve in these ways*. I occasionally hear people tell me that they want to do something in the church because it would mean a lot to them. They think they’d like to try something new. But

the problem is that no one else sees those gifts in them. And if our gifts are about the whole body and not just about what we want, then we need to pay attention to this.

Just as God gave Jesus gifts to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, our God-given gifts are offered to us – not to benefit us but – to serve the greater good, to do our part to bring God’s kingdom on earth.

Here’s the thing about a true Christian community: we can’t know each other’s *gifts* unless we know *each other*. It’s impossible to be a community if we only see each other coming in and out of church on Sunday mornings. It’s impossible to be a community of faith, *to uphold our baptismal vows* if we don’t spend enough time with each other to notice each other’s gifts.

This is what it means to be the church. It means many things, but one characteristic is that we realize we are a gifted community and God wants us to discern and develop our gifts. We do this not as an exercise in self-improvement though. We do this to expand the Kingdom of God.

May this new year bring an clear awareness of our God-given gifts and the gifts of those around us. May we encourage each other in noticing and sharing these gifts. And may the gift of God’s grace and love in Christ be the first gift we aim to share.