

As a child, the infancy narratives in Luke and Matthew confused me. There was so much that didn't make sense or follow a logical order. Being literally minded, I could not understand how John the Baptist could be a voice crying out in the wilderness when he was only six months older than Jesus. One week he's an adult hermit and the next he hasn't even been born.

The story of the Magi left me with more questions than answers. What did Joseph and Mary do with the gold, frankincense and myrrh? Not that I had any idea what frankincense and myrrh were, but I knew gold was valuable so frankincense and myrrh must be valuable too. Did they hold it in trust until Jesus got older? Did they spend it to survive while they were refugees in Egypt? Was Joseph the kind of man whose money burned a hole in his pocket? Why didn't the gifts make them rich? Since these questions had no answers I began to doubt the veracity of the stories. Happily my school work introduced me to the idea of metaphor, foreshadowing, and character development and I began to understand that a story can contain truth without being factually accurate.

So in telling us about the Magi, the wise men, what is Matthew telling us about Jesus? Who was his audience and what message would they

have understood? How did he use resources that would be helpful to his audience and shape it to his purpose? Scholars posit that Matthew was likely a Jewish Christian writing for a mixed Jewish and gentile Christian community. As such, he and his audience would have been familiar with the passage we heard from Isaiah as well as Psalm 72. Were these passages from Hebrew Scripture predictive? Perhaps. But they also contain a particular message that Matthew's audience would have known.

While the passage from Isaiah was likely written early in the post-exilic period and offered that community hope where none had existed before, it also invites the reader or listener to observe what GOD is doing in and with his creation. God comes to his creation as a redeemer to those who turn away from their transgressions. Those early Christians would have known immediately that the redeemer had been manifested in a person, in the person of Jesus. The reference to gold and frankincense would have been understood to be gifts that reflect the greatness of God and are given to glorify God and not creation.¹

¹ Samuel E. Balentine, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C, vol. 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY) 2009, 194, 196, 198.

Psalm 72 is one of the royal psalms - its original purpose may have been a hymn for the coronation of a king. It is clear that God has high expectations for the monarchy in carrying out the divine will - that of insuring justice, righteousness and peace which are inseparable from the empowerment of the poor and the needy. By enduring through the ages, this Psalm highlights that the monarchy was a failure in carrying out God's will and that the expectations of God have been transferred to ALL of God's people, not just the monarch. Matthew's community would have grasped that Jesus truly understood, lived out and embodied the will of God as reflected in this psalm and in the Epiphany passage. They knew that Jesus calls us as his followers to do the same.²

Matthew's community would have immediately picked up on the fact that the wisemen were foreigners, gentiles and they would have recognized that these foreign gentiles knew about the Messiah only from signs in nature while the Jewish hierarchy, who had the witness of Scripture and who knew of the one, true God were afraid of this same Messiah and would reject him. These are the very people who should know better! Yet through this artful foreshadowing, Matthew is letting us in on why it appears

² J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Exegetical Perspective," Ibid, 200, 202, 204.

to be gentiles who learn of and embrace Jesus more readily than those who should have known better. Gentiles have been followers of Jesus from almost the very beginning. And they bring really, really good gifts!

I imagine that Bob Newhart, that great comedian, could have had a wonderful “telephone” conversation skit about what to bring the Messiah. It could have gone like this:

Balthazar? Do you know what time it is? It’s past midnight! ...

What now? ... You saw what? ... Oh, a star! I thought you said a scar, I couldn’t imagine why a scar would be rising... It’s a star of such brightness that you think it significant? ...Of what? ... Balthazar, we’re not even Jewish why would we go? ... Oh, I see you’re calling all the astrologers and Melchior and Gaspar are definately going...You think that this is the astrological event of the millenium. ... Hmmm, yes I see. Do I want to go? ... Well, well, sure. Are you bringing anything? ... Oh, gifts ARE expected at this kind of thing. So what, a bottle of wine, some candy for the parents and maybe a gift card to Babies are us?... No? Sss, sss, something befitting a king? ...what would that be? ... Gold or frankincense or myrrh! Where would I get that at this time of night?! I don’t even know

what myrrh is! okay, okay, I'll figure something out. See you in a few hours.

And we have to figure something out too. One of my favorite Christmas hymns is "In the deep midwinter" with the soulful tune by Gustav Holst and the lyrics by Christina Rossetti. The 4th verse of hymn 112 goes like this: What can I bring him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were I wise man, I would do my part. What can I give him? Give him my heart!

Matthew's ephiphany story invites us to bring our gift to the Christ child as well. It gives us the opportunity to decided what kind of disciple we seek to become in light of the Christ event. In giving our heart, can we be like the wise men and respond to God's call and follow God's and Jesus' example by giving of ourselves freely and generously to both God and to our fellow human beings? God has given of himself by being human, by living among us, in dying for us and in overcoming death on our behalf. We can't match that gift, but we can follow the example. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians tells us how.

He tells us to seek unity in a fallen world, strive to overcome all the distinctions and other inequalities that hinder the reign of God's generous

overflowing and infectious love. Jesus' presence continues through us as faithful, living witnesses as his church in the world.³

We have lots of opportunities to be just that in our little part of creation. In the season of resolutions, we can resolve to give wholeheartedly to Jesus, with small, incremental acts. Each act, no matter how small, can make a big difference in our faith journey. We can attend the Big Conversation next week on gun violence at Littleham/Middletown. We can work in our food pantry, prepare and serve soup, make dinner for Three Oaks, or simply be a loving presence at the bedside of one who is sick or dying. We can resolve to pray at least 5 minutes a day, and if we don't know how, check out page 137 of the Book of Common Prayer. We can sit with Scripture using Forward Day by Day or any number of apps. My personal favorite is Pray as You Go. So I invite us to ponder how we might give our heart to Jesus more than we already do, and what small habit we might begin that will help us become the type of disciple God hopes we will be.

³ Rollin S. Ramsaran, "Exegetical Perspective," Ibid, 207,209, 211.

