

Sermon- Our Saviors Lutheran Church- Epiphany Sunday- 1/6/2019
Text- Matthew 2:1-12

Rattles or Treasure Chests

Grace and Peace to you and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Well, here we are on Epiphany Sunday. As a 1st generation son of a couple from the Holy Land it meant the end of the Christmas season. The tree was undecorated and removed and our last gift was opened. (12 days of Christmas.) And of course we had fatimagna and krumkake. Epiphany is a bigger deal in Europe and Latin America. In Spain the children go out on January 5th to find the greenest blade of grass, which they place in a shoebox or a basket under their bed. The hope is that the camels of the three kings account will stop at their homes and bring them presents just as they brought gifts to the Christ Child. Epiphany Sunday- all of us know the story of the wise guys and the gifts they brought for Jesus.

I remember back when I was teaching confirmation class at Our Saviours in Appleton. Seems like such a long time ago, and it was. I asked the students, "what did you get for Christmas?" The list and the response was endless. After all, they were rather affluent privileged kids. But then, I asked a different question. "What did you give for Christmas?" Some had no idea because their parents took care of their gift giving. (That should be another sermon sometime. How we have enabled children their whole lives.) But surprisingly some children did give gifts, all by themselves. Here is how a few responded!

I gave my brother respect.

I gave a certificate to mow the lawn once a week

One 8th grader gave a slip that he would give his time for whatever his parents needed.

In other words, they gave a piece of themselves.

Today in our Gospel lesson, we find the origin for this ritual of gift giving that we observe at Christmas. We find Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus still in the rustic manger in Bethlehem. Without any advance warning some wise guys arrive from the east. Astronomers who probably spent their lives studying the movement of the stars and then interpreting what the movements meant. Something in the western sky told them that a big thing was happening over Bethlehem and they traveled many miles to check it out.

Tradition tells us that there were three wise guys. But we don't know that for sure. Could have been 5 or 20. Scripture doesn't say. Probably a bunch of women also. You know, making sure that the direction was correct. What the scripture does say is that they brought 3 gifts with them. Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh.

"On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."

Great Story! What is also interesting are the gifts that the wise guys bring!

Gold - not as valuable as it is today. Actually very plentiful, tons of it in the Temple in Jerusalem. But certainly, it was revered because of its beauty. Used mostly for jewelry.

Frankincense- this was a perfume. Usually used when a lamb was sacrificed. So this 2nd gift had to do with forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of a lamb.

Myrrh- this is another fragrance. It was a gum-like substance that was used for embalming. Preparing a body for burial and also mixed with wine to medicate those who were crucified.

Interesting! Yes?

Have you ever wondered about what Joseph and Mary must have been feeling? Here they are and at their child's birth, total strangers keep appearing. First shepherds, who were among the least educated and least sophisticated people in Palestine. Talked to them about angels. Probably wondered if they had been drinking. Then astronomers, the most educated and sophisticated people found anywhere. And they bring gifts, not practical gifts like Pampers, a rattle or a mobile for the crib, but totally impractical gifts. I don't know about you, but I would have been confused.

But, looking at the Gospel text more closely, there is a subtle phrase that almost goes unnoticed.

"and they knelt down and paid him homage" (reverence, respect, and honor.)
"then they opened up their treasure chests."

Wow. They were so moved that they gave the most valuable stuff they had. They felt like they were in the presence of God. They were in awe.

So, what's the message for us today. After all we are in the presence of God. We should be in awe! What will we offer him? (The Stewardship Team is probably thinking, go for it Pastor. Have the people empty their pockets and purses and checkbooks.) But this is not about cash. It's opening up our treasure chests and offering to Jesus the stuff we have locked away in there, sometimes for decades. You know- Your money, your time, a grudge, a sin you have not been able to get rid of, an addiction that is killing your family, a heart that is hardened by an unforgiving attitude. You see, the wise guys opened their hearts to Jesus. Gave him themselves, their reverence.

So maybe, today we offer to God the most valuable thing we have - ourselves. This is precisely the right time to open your heart and offer yourself to Jesus Christ as a follower, as a disciple.

Soon, you will get up and hear the words - Body of Christ given for you, Blood of Christ shed for you. So, my prayer is that as you receive communion you silently say - "Lord, My Epiphany gift to you is ME". I will change and open up my life, my treasure chests and give you myself. Actually, that is exactly what Jesus wants. Not a baby rattle, but our hearts.
Amen. Let it be so!