

The Gift of Presence
The Advent Conspiracy - Part III
Matthew 2:1-12
December 11, 2011

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

Last Sunday Alex introduced us to the idea of "presence" vs. "presents." Our theme last week for part II of our *Advent Conspiracy* was "Spend Less." Our theme today, for part III, is "Give More." At first thought it almost seems like a contradiction. How can we spend less and yet give more?

Our story this morning is kind of a contradiction as well, especially chronologically. The story of the Magi, is out of place from the normal Christmas story. Chronologically, the Magi come after the Shepherds, who we will be looking at next Sunday. But the truth is, we don't really know for sure when the Magi came. It was sometime after Jesus' birth in the manger or stable and sometime before Mary and Joseph returning to Nazareth after the census was taken. It says in our Scripture this morning, "they visited the child and his mother Mary in a home." Most likely Mary and Joseph had found a home to live in for a brief period of time between the birth and the census. Or they could have even been living in the home of Joseph's parents, for Bethlehem was his home town. Chronologically, the story of the Magi, might not fit with the original Christmas or Nativity story at all. They probably came well after he was presented in the temple. Perhaps up to six months or a year after he was born.

The Magi. Tradition has it that they were “three kings.” Most likely, not kings at all. The word “magi” in Greek (magoi) is probably best translated as “magicians.” But not magicians as we would understand them to mean today. The magi were probably very intelligent men. Even scholars or professors. Perhaps a mix between astrologers and astronomers. They studied the skies to try and determine the times they were in. Speculation is that by stating “they came from the east,” and “they came from afar,” is that they came all the way from Babylon or Persia, up to a thousand miles away from Jerusalem. A trip in that day which would have taken a minimum of three months, walking and/or on camel back, and as long as six months. They were non-Jews who had been heavily influenced by the Jews who had been forced to live in exile in the far eastern. They had heard about the Messiah who was to come and since they were seekers, most likely they studied the Jewish Scriptures as well.

And then the star appeared. Was it really a super-natural event or was it a natural event in the course of God’s design? There is a lot of speculation. Perhaps a comet. Or the aligning of the planets Jupiter and Venus. But it wasn’t an event that was seen by all. Only for those learned men who were truly seeking. And they had been studying the Scriptures and discovered that the time was about right and the place where the coming Messiah was to be born:

‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’
Micah 5:2

Prophecy, not just from Micah but a long history of prophets. Not only where by Messiah was to be born but to whom, a virgin pledged to be married to a man from the line of David.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Isaiah 7:13

For the magi it all made sense. It all fit together. So much so that they were willing to put aside everything and go and find the child so they could bow down and worship Him. The Magi were seekers:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks the door will be opened.”
Matthew 7:7-8 (NIV)

The magi continued their search. And when they found “the star” it says they were “overjoyed.” What does it really mean to be overjoyed? It means to be very greatly, exceedingly filled with joy. It is beyond happy or joyful. It means to be so filled with joy that some level of joy stays in us even when we go through trials, suffering, and hardship. There is only a couple of other times we find the word “overjoyed” in the NIV of the Bible. It says in John 20:20 that the disciples were “overjoyed” when they first saw Jesus after he was resurrected. And Peter (1 Peter 4:12-13) tells us, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trials you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. For the Magi, his glory had been revealed. “When they saw the child with his mother they bowed down and worshiped

him.” When was the last time you were “overjoyed?” It’s really only when we are “overjoyed” that we truly worship something or someone.

They opened their treasures and presented him with three gifts of “gold,” “frankincense,” and “myrrh.” Three interesting gifts. How much value did they really represent and what did they mean? Some say perhaps not really that much, while others say they were of great worth. Many believe that it’s very likely that these wise men sold everything they had to purchase the gifts which they brought. One estimate I read puts it in today’s value as much as \$1 million or even more!

But was it the value of the gifts which was important or was it their significance? After all, what was a baby or a young child going to do with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And if it was of such great value what happened to it? Did Mary & Joseph invest it for Jesus’ college education? Was he to get it when he turned 18? Where did it go?

Gold - the metal fit for a king, frankincense - incense that was used mostly by priests in temple worship and during certain rituals, and myrrh that which was used mostly to prepare one’s body for burial. The three gifts foretold the three main roles Jesus would play: Lord & King, High Priest, and Savior. The gifts foretold what was to come. The baby who had been born “King of the Jews,” would come to serve others, and ultimately sacrifice his life for all.

The other significant factor regarding the magi is that they are presented to us in contrast to the shepherds whom we will look at next week. Whereas the shepherds were lowly, humble, peasants, most likely Jewish, and came from a very short distance to see the Christ child, the magi were intelligent, wealthy, non-Jewish, and came from a far. The magi’s story points towards God’s gift of salvation being available to all people.

The entire Christmas story is about the gift of “presence.” The key is found in our Scripture from last week:

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has said through the prophet; ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ - which means, ‘God with us.’”
Matthew 1:22-23 (NIV)

What is the greatest gift you have ever received for Christmas? For the adults here this morning, if you’re like me you know you have received lots of nice gifts, but is there one that really stands out? And the more gifts one receives, the less meaning any one gift has. But of course if someone really wants to buy me a Lexus automobile, the ads which I have been watching on television, that would be a gift I would remember. How many people really buys cars for Christmas presents?

God’s answer for the world’s problems has never been material things. Even important material things like food, water and clothing. God never promised to give us stuff, even good stuff like work, food, or health. He gave us himself. The greatest gift is the gift that God has given us in himself, Emmanuel. What we celebrate on Christmas and every time we gather as Christians to worship is the ultimate gift of God’s presence:

“Jesus exploded into the life of ancient Israel - the life of the whole world in fact - not as a teacher of tireless truths, not as a great moral example, but as the one through whose life, death, and resurrection God’s rescue operation was put into effect.” N.T. Wright, Simply Christian

What did God give us when he gave us his son? Three very important points:

1. He gave us His Presence

How can we give the gift of presence to others this Advent and Christmas season?

We have a lot of pseudo-community today - e-mails, facebook, texts, tweets which can supplement but cannot take the place of “presence.” What would have happened if God decided that he was just too busy for us to send his Son, “I know what I’ll do, I’ll text them and tell them what they should do?” We’d still be dead to our sins.

Nothing can replace the gift of presence.

How about a gift card to a coffee shop or a restaurant with the stipulation that you meet with that person during those times. Be creative.

2. The Gift of Jesus was Personal.

Listen to these words carefully: “Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11 NIV). “A Savior has been born to you!” It doesn’t get more personal than that. God’s gift of Jesus was for all and yet it was personal for everyone.

Jesus was about relationships with people. He paid attention, He listened, He noticed. He did everything that people in a hurry forget to do. In all the stories that we read about Jesus, when did he give one material thing to anybody?

That should make us sit up and take notice. How do we make our gift(s) more personal?

A father and his teenage daughter were enjoying their last Christmas at home before she went away to college the following summer. Dad decided to give her two leather journals for Christmas, one for her to write in and one for himself.

With the agreement that over the course of the next year they would both write their feelings as his daughter experienced her last months at home - their questions, their fears, their memories, what it means to let go, what it means to go. The next Christmas they would exchange their journals.

That’s the only gift the father gave to his daughter. Two empty journals for Christmas . At first thought rather impersonal and inadequate. But no gift could have been more relational, more personal, and no other gift would stand a chance of being appreciated so warmly or remembered for so long.

3. Third important point to God's gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Something that we are going to look at in more detail on Christmas morning, His gift was Costly.

Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross! Philippians 2:6-8 (NIV)

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45 (NIV)

The gift God gave us in His Son, Jesus Christ, cost him everything. That was the significance of the gifts presented by the Magi.

What does that mean for us as we now give to one another? Relational giving costs!!! It will cost us time and energy. It will cost us something of ourselves. It is much easier just to stop at the store or go on-line and buy something.

How about giving someone the gift of presence this Christmas? Or, how about offering the gift of forgiveness to someone this Christmas? Maybe someone that has hurt you or someone you love very deeply? Not because they deserve it but because that is the gift that God has given you. Jesus gave himself knowing full well that many would reject and misunderstand him. Part of relational giving is knowing that we may be rejected and misunderstood.

When we fully understand what is happening at Christmas, joy should be our number one response. "Overjoyed, unspeakable joy." Jesus has come to bring light into our darkness, hope into our moments of despair, forgiveness from all our sins, life after death.