

Epiphany Sunday is traditionally celebrated on either January 6 or the first Sunday in January; however, since we started the new year last Sunday with the Wesley Covenant Service, this morning I want to go back and focus on Epiphany. So, this morning let's celebrate the visit of the wise men, who brought gifts to the Christ Child.

Now there's a key theological point in this story that you may not have ever considered. These men were foreigners, men from the East, who came searching for the child born to be a king. Thus, Jesus not only came to be the Messiah for the Jews, but also the Savior and King of all the world. Today we celebrate God's plan for the coming of Jesus Christ and the salvation of all people as represented by the visit of the Magi.

Epiphany is celebrated with a wide array of customs around the world. For example, in Puerto Rico and many Latin countries this day is observed as Three Kings Day. It marks the end of the Christmas season, which began on the first Sunday of Advent. Within the church, this day is celebrated with plays and special songs emphasizing the coming of the kings and their gifts for the Christ Child. In the homes, the children are told to place boxes filled with hay under their beds so that the camels will eat the hay and the kings will leave presents for the children.

There is also a special Three Kings Cake that is filled with either cream or chocolate and decorated with a paper crown. There is normally a figure of a king in the cake; if you find it you get to wear the crown. There is also a dried bean, but if you find it you have to pay for the cake. In Bulgaria, the priest throws a wooden cross into a lake or river and then men dive into the freezing water to retrieve it. It is believed that good health will be bestowed on the home of the first swimmer to reach the cross.

Finally, it is a tradition that all Christmas decorations must be taken down by January 6; but according to my mother they had to be down before New Year's Day or we would have bad luck for the entire year. However, I really think she didn't want us to be like all our redneck neighbors and leave the decorations up all year long. There are many more wonderful traditions associated with Epiphany that I don't have time to cover this morning, but if you are interested, I suggest you google it.

Now let's see how the Gospel of Matthew records the visit of the wise men in the second chapter the first twelve verses.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Now we don't know much about the Magi or the wise men. While Matthew is the only book in the Bible that mentions them, he does not tell us how many there were, their names, how far

they traveled, or even the country that they came from. Thus, there are numerous legends that have emerged over the centuries about them. The hymn that we just sang, "We Three Kings," indicates that there were three wise men. However, this tradition is based solely on the number of gifts mentioned in Matthew. Some scholars even believe that there may have been as many as twelve in the group; however, one lady said that she doubted that there were ever 12 wise men in the entire world. Another woman said that if they had been three wise women, they would have asked for directions, arrived in time to help deliver the baby, and prepared a casserole for the visiting shepherds.

While Matthew does not give us their names, according to later legends, they were kings and were called Caspar, Balthazar (Bal-the-zar), and Melchior (Mel-key-or). There is also the belief that they were from a tribe of priests and were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. Some believe that they were students of the stars.

Now it may seem extraordinary to us today that these men would set out from the East and travel approximately 1,200 miles looking for a king. But it is believed that at the time of Jesus' birth the world was expecting the coming of a king. Men were waiting for God and the desire of God was in their hearts. It was to a waiting world that Jesus came, and when He came, the ends of the earth were gathered at His cradle.

When the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus now living in a house, and no longer in a stable. Filled with joy at the completion of their quest, the wise men knelt in an outpouring of devotion and offered their treasures in an act of worship to the baby Jesus. They presented Him with gifts that would symbolize His life and ministry; gold for a king; frankincense for a priest; and myrrh for one who would die. These were no ordinary trinkets to dangle over a child's crib; they were adult gifts fit for a king.

Even at the cradle of Jesus, each gift represented an aspect of Jesus' future ministry here on earth. Gold is the gift of a king; the True King that God had promised David. However, Jesus was to reign, not by force like Herod and the Romans, but by love. He was to rule over the hearts of the people, not from a throne, but from a cross.

Frankincense was a gift for a priest; the perfect High Priest who will intercede on our behalf before God. The function of a priest was to open the way for men and women to God. The Latin word for priest is pontifex which means bridge-builder. Jesus came to build a bridge between us and God. He came to bridge the gap in the broken relationship between humanity and their Creator. Through His life, death and resurrection Jesus opened the way to God. He made it possible for every one of us to have a personal relationship with God.

Now myrrh is a bitter herb and here represents the gift for one who was born to die. It was a spice that was used to anoint the bodies of the dead. Jesus came to fulfill the prophecies of the

Old Testament. As the angel told Joseph, Jesus came to save us from ourselves and from our sins. He came to die as an atonement for our sins and to bring us salvation. Even at the beginning of Jesus' life there was the prediction of the cross at the end of the road.

Verse 11 says that the wise men opened their treasure chests and presented their gifts to the baby Jesus in an act of worship. Now treasures are defined as valuable or precious items. Thus, the wise men gave their best; they spared no expense. As they opened their treasure chests to the Christ Child, they also opened their hearts and their lives to Him. As I said earlier, we know very little about these men; however, I would bet that their lives were changed forever after kneeling before this child. The Bible tells us that they returned to their homeland by a different route and most likely as different men. There is no doubt that their visit had made a difference in their lives and would make a difference in the lives of all that they in turn would meet.

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of giving. God sets the example for us by giving His only Begotten Son to be our Savior. To become our Savior, Jesus became our substitute. He bore our sins by dying on an old wooden cross, by giving His life for us.

Because God first loved us, we should love Him. Because God gave His best, we should give our best back to Him. True worship is bringing the best we have to God, Who has already given His best for us. We give but little when we give of our material possessions. It is when we give of ourselves that we truly give our best. Oswald Chambers calls this giving "your utmost to His highest!"

Have you ever wondered why God loves a cheerful giver as stated in 2 Corinthians 9:7? God loves in a special way those who have responded to His love and become a channel through which His love reaches others. God gives out of grace, not debt. He has given His best; now it is our turn. One of the meanings of Epiphany is to show or to reveal. We are called to show Jesus Christ to the world around us not only through our words, but also our daily lives through acts of love and service to others. As the old saying goes: actions speak louder than words.

Billy Graham said that God has given us two hands: one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not meant to be basins for hoarding; we are to be channels made for sharing. God's kingdom is built one stone at a time; one act of kindness, one act of love, one act of service.

It's like the story of a chicken and a pig who approached a church and read the sign out front advertising the sermon title: "What can we do to help the poor?" Immediately the chicken suggested that they give them a breakfast of bacon and eggs. The pig thought for a moment and replied: "There's only one thing wrong with feeding bacon and eggs to the poor. For you it requires only a contribution, but for me it requires a total commitment." God wants our total commitment, not our lip service or best intentions.

As we begin 2023, what gifts are you willing to bring to the Lord? As the wise men gave of their best, what do we have to give in service to the Lord? Now while I'm not just talking about our financial resources, I truly believe that our financial contributions to the Lord are a good indicator of our spiritual growth. However, I'm also talking about giving our best, our all to the Lord – our time, our talents, our resources, and most importantly, our hearts. Where will you serve the Lord this coming year by giving of your best?

As a church, we accomplished a lot for the Lord over the past year. We continue to feed the hungry through the Pantry, the Community of Hope and the Interfaith Bible Center in the International Zone of Albuquerque, to provide weekend food packages for over 125 school children each month, to show appreciation for service by distributing gift baskets, to provide much needed support for St. Joseph Mission School and Pastor Chris Davis in Gallup, and support through our Second Mile Giving.

But we must not rest on our laurels. There is so much more to be done for God's kingdom, especially here in Rio Rancho. Many of you are already actively involved in some service project to the community and I encourage you to continue serving. However, the beginning of a new year is always a good time to reflect on where God is calling us to serve. I hope and pray that you will take some time to be alone with God in prayer and to listen to what He is calling you to do with your time and resources this coming year. Look at the list in the bulletin and see where you can help.

Have you ever thought that there would not have been any Epiphany or visit by the wise men if God had not shown the Magi the way first. Think about how many people back then saw the Star of Bethlehem, but only the Magi chose to follow it. Will you choose to follow God and serve where He is calling you?

Now I am not in the habit of using poems in my sermons; however, as we start 2023, I would like to share my favorite poem, *The Bridge Builder* by Will Allen Dromgoole:

An old man traveling a lone highway,  
Came at evening, cold and gray,  
To a chasm, vast and deep and wide,  
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.

The old man crossed in the twilight dim,  
The sullen stream held no fears for him;  
But he turned when safe on the other side,  
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," cried a fellow pilgrim near,  
"You're wasting your time in building here."

Your journey will end with the closing day;  
You will never again pass this way;  
You've crossed the chasm, deep and wide.  
Why build you this bridge at evening tide?"

The builder lifted his old grey head:  
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,  
"There followeth after me today  
A youth, whose feet must pass this way.

This stream which has been as naught to me,  
To that fair-haired youth may pitfall be:  
He, too, must cross in twilight dim:  
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."

We too are called to build bridges for those who follow after us. Will you build bridges of love, hope, and compassion for others? Will you make a difference in the lives of others in 2023? When 2023 comes to a close, will you be able to look back and see that you have made a difference; that things are better because you passed this way?

The spirit of Christmas is the spirit of giving. Let us become givers of ourselves to God, to our families, and to others. John Wesley in his wisdom said: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you can." As the wise men knelt before the baby Jesus, kneel and present the gift of your heart, your commitment, your best to the Lord. Amen