

Christmas Gifts

During our Advent journey within the church the focus is on the blessing that come to us through the arrival of Emmanuel—God with Us. We light these candles of hope, peace, joy and love which symbolically we place around Christ. Intuitively, we seem to know that these are gifts—Christmas gifts—that come into our lives through the birth of Jesus. In many respect throughout the year, we notice the church calendar can be both fixed and somewhat unpredictable at the same time. The most obvious of the flexible nature comes at Easter which is tied to Passover which is tied to the Jewish calendar, etc. I am sure I don't have to remind you that Christmas Day is always December 25th. You might not be as familiar with the fact that the Epiphany of the Lord is always January 6th, but it is also always a fixed date. It always occurs twelve days after Christmas. What changes is the day of the week on which the dates occur. This means some years the Sundays that are present in what the church considers Christmas tide varies: there may be only one with Epiphany and the wise men arriving before a second Sunday. However, this year there are two. Because it is not yet time for the appearance of the wise men in Bethlehem, the gospel text this morning was not selected from Matthew's account of that arrival. Usually we focus on how the appearance of the star in the east was God's announcement to the whole world, not just to the Israelites that the plan for humanity's redemption had begun—God's gift of salvation for all had arrived when God entered history incarnate. Humanity received the greatest of all possible gifts. Instead this morning our gospel reading this morning from John is a beautiful description of God's entrance into our world: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." This text's focus is on the wonder and glory of the gift. The description in John's opening explains just what a gift was given—"To all who received him, who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." John's description of the incarnation, of God's plan and purpose to redeem humanity is the beautiful description of a gift of love beyond our comprehension. The Christmas gift we received which was tied to the Easter cross. The Epistle passage is in many ways a summary of these gifts we have been given: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoptions as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." The gifts of being claimed; the gift of grace freely bestowed; being held blameless for our sin because of the Word who became flesh and dwelled among us—our Christmas gift indeed. This extra week to contemplate the amazing wonder of the gift that we have been given through the arrival of this infant seems an opportunity to contemplate what type of response is called needed. The response of the shepherds to the news was to go and see, to be amazed, and then to share what the news that had been shared with them. The response of those wise men in the East who see this new star is to follow it, to seek out the source, and to bring gifts of their own to pay homage. And it is the arrival of these visitors described in Matthew which seems to have created the tradition of gift giving around our Christmas celebrations. The passage from

Matthew 2:1-12 which describes their arrival, first at Herod's palace and then in Bethlehem where they paid homage to the child indicates they brought treasure chests. Matthew 2:11 tells us: "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." This has caused me to think this year, what are the gifts which we might offer to the one who gives us so much? If we take a look at the verbs which are scattered throughout the texts today, the texts which are not about the wise men bearing gifts, I think we can find some answers. The texts before us this morning are full of praise for what God is doing they are full of joy and proclamation about God's presence. These texts call for unabashed praise for all that God has done, all that God is doing, and all that God will do. The descriptions are about more than mild gratitude. They are about praise that so fills us it is reflected outward from us into the world around us that it becomes a witness to God's presence with us. It is praise that celebrates and reflects back into the world the radiant goodness of our God so that Emmanuel is seen and known by those who know us. These texts tell us we are blessed, ransomed, redeemed. These texts tell us that God has chosen, God has destined us to be God's own because from the beginning God loved. Knowing we have been claimed in this manner, we should indeed be radiant and full of praise. All of these texts contain the revelation of God's glory and goodness; the revelation that that glory and goodness is remarkably directed toward us. It is that revelation which elicits our praise, singing and joy. Yet within these texts it seems there is something that God desires which we seem to consistently ignore. Scattered throughout these texts, like the vision found in Isaiah of the peaceable kingdom, Jeremiah the prophet speaks of the gathering from the farthest parts of the earth which includes the blind and the lame. In the Ephesians passage there is a plan for in the fullness of time for all things to be gathered up. As the angels sang that night to shepherds in Judea in Luke's gospel, it was peace on earth and good will to men, and the star announced God's redemption to those living far away from Judea, it seems that the gift given was always meant to gather and include. The recognition of this might be the gift we can bring to our Lord. What we can bring to our Lord beginning at Christmas might resemble the candles we find around the Advent wreath---that we might find it within ourselves to do as the man Jesus taught his disciples---to love one another as he loved them---to love even their enemies---to forgive as they wished to be forgiven--- to follow more closely the teachings that he gave to us when he calls us to be disciples. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.