

## 2021 01 10 – The Gifts We Give

**Matthew 2:1-12** (The Inclusive Bible)

In today's scripture reading, the astrologers from the East followed a star to Bethlehem in order to find the "newborn ruler of the Jews." And when they found Jesus and his mother, Mary, they opened their treasure chests and presented the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some would suggest that our tradition of giving gifts at Christmas started as a result of these three gifts given over 2000 years ago.

But who were these astrologers from the East? They have been given many names: wise men, kings, scholars, sorcerers and magi. All we really know about them is that they were foreigners (non-Jews); they were educated (in particular, they studied the stars and the scriptures) and they obviously had access to wealth (it takes money to travel and to offer such extravagant gifts).

What we don't know is how many of them there were, what country (or countries) they were from or why they felt the need to pay homage to the "newborn ruler of the Jews." We don't even know if they were all men. I want to share with you a short story from Jan Richardson's book *In Wisdom's Path*. Jan wrote:

My friend, Carolyn, tells a wonderful story of the year when her daughter Jennifer, then a young girl, portrayed a wise man in their church's nativity play. Two of Jennifer's girlfriends also played wise men. Jennifer stirred

up a lot of commotion by repeatedly asserting, ‘We’re not wise men, we’re wise women!’

Jan goes on to say,

I love the image of this young girl, now a strong young woman, claiming this name for herself. She too, has gifts to bear. Unique offerings even more precious than frankincense, gold, and myrrh. I long for her defiant words to be on the lips of every girl; for every child, female and male, to gaze at their hands and know that Wisdom’s blood runs through them, that the gifts that they carry are a treasure, are a blessing, are a grace.

(Jan Richardson, *In Wisdom’s Path*, page 28)

I agree with Jan Richardson. We have all been blessed with gifts from the Sacred. Think of all the gifts that you have been given. They may include such things as: life itself, family, friends, knowledge, skills, possessions, money, and even personal characteristics such as kindness or determination. First, we need to recognize and to acknowledge our own gifts and then determine how we are going to hold them, use them and let them go.

The astrologers from the east, the magi, chose to use their gifts to follow a star so they could honour a newborn king. They took a big risk starting out on a journey with only a star to lead them. The magi believed that this new “ruler of the Jews” was born when that star first appeared and they shared that information with King Herod. If we read further in the story we discover that, when the astrologers failed to return to Jerusalem, Herod “gave orders to kill all male children that were two years old and younger living in and around Bethlehem.”

From this horrific act, we can calculate that the magi spent close to two years, first preparing for, and then travelling, on their journey to Bethlehem. It was a long journey and in those days there were no planes or trains or even cars to get them there. They probably travelled on foot or by camel or donkey.

Using our gifts to their full potential, can require significant work, time and even sacrifice. The gifts we have been given are precious and so we need to take care them. But they also need to be used and even given away. I want to share another story from Jan Richardson's book. She writes:

A long time ago, I became fascinated by the tradition of the giveaway practiced among many Native American nations. Typically taking place in ceremonial gatherings, the giveaway affords the opportunity for the community to honour certain members. In return, the honorees offer gifts to others to whom they want to show their appreciation and gratitude. I have heard it said that in societies that practice the giveaway, wealth is measured not by what one possesses but by what one gives away.

I have heard, too, that gifts offered in the giveaway sometimes include possessions that the giver has long treasured. This generosity in particular beckons me to ponder my own practices of giving. I believe that objects soak up some of the spirit of their owners, and that when we give someone a possession that has meant a great deal to us, we pass on part of our own essence. (Jan Richardson, *In Wisdom's Path*, page 34)

Like Jan Richardson, I believe that the giving of gifts requires us to share some of who we are, some of our own essence. Whether the gifts that we give are material possessions, or talents or skills or even the gift of a smile, they require us to let go of something that has been given to us. How many of us would be willing to give away our treasured possessions, our most cherished gifts?

What and why we give matters. What kind of gifts do you give? Do you prefer practical gifts or do you sometimes splurge on something a little more extravagant, something that your family member or friend would never buy for themselves? The gifts we give are often meant to show how much we care for and appreciate the recipient. What we give has meaning.

But what about the gifts we give to strangers? For example, it has been a Christmas tradition in this and many other churches to give White Gifts that are then passed on to those in need in our communities. These gifts are usually very practical: toilet paper, peanut butter, pasta and other non-perishables. At one time we even had the practice of filling a hamper full of food suitable for a traditional Christmas meal. But how do we know that these gifts really meet the needs of the people who receive them? Do the gifts honour their traditions, their expectations, and their desires? Do they express an appropriate level of mutuality, humility and appreciation?

To be honest, here at First United, we have moved away from the traditional hampers and now offer gift cards instead. This way each family can use our gift

to meet their needs and help them fulfill their traditions. If they choose to use it for something we would deem extravagant, that is up to them.

When the star “came to a standstill over the place where the child lay,” the astrologers were overjoyed. And when they entered the house and found the child with Mary, his mother, these wealthy, educated travellers “prostrated themselves and paid homage.” In other words they lay down with their faces to the floor in an act of submission and reverence. They paid no attention to the size of the home, the possessions that filled it or the clothes that Mary and her child were wearing. They understand who Jesus was and who he would up grow to be and they honoured him. Like our First Nations neighbours, these astrologers from the east, gave their gifts with joy, with gratitude and with humility.

The gifts we give matter. They are a reflection of the love and gratitude that we feel for all that God has given us. They are also a reflection of the love that we have for our family, our friends and our neighbours. I want to end with a short blessing from Jan Richardson. There are three verses and I will repeat each one of them twice:

That our receiving may be like breathing: taking in, letting go.

That our holding may be like loving: taking care, setting free.

That our giving may be like leaving: singing thanks, moving on.

(Jan Richardson, *In Wisdom's Path*, page 34)

Amen.