

“Come to the Manger. Bring Your Gifts”

Matthew 2:1-12

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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2 ¹⁻²After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him.”

³⁻⁴When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

⁵⁻⁶They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."

⁷⁻⁸Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he

got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

⁹⁻¹⁰Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

¹¹They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

¹²In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

I. HERE WE COME, BELOVED ONES

We've been seeking, lo these many weeks. Looking for Jesus. Coming to the manger, coming to Jesus with our longing hearts. All the way from the beginning of Advent, through Christmas, and now—on this Eve of Epiphany—we seek the Light that is coming into the world, for Jesus Christ is the Light of the World!

We have been looking for a sign. A star, perhaps. A confirmation from the heavens or a message from the depths of the earth that *God is with us*—Emmanuel—*always* with us, and now even more so.

In Advent we prepare our hearts, our very lives for the Coming, capital C. We long for hope, peace, love and joy as we light candles and sing and pray—here in this sanctuary and all over the world.

And as we pray for those gifts, we seek to *bring* the gifts in return. For hope, peace, love and joy can only be brought forth into this world if we are the *agents* of them—Christ's hands and feet, eyes and ears, mouth and heart. “Christ has no body now but ours.”

We have been through our trials, been through some significant darkness, in this season as Christ seekers. And, the world seems to grow darker even still, as talk of war and raging fires, schisms and painful divides threaten to undo us as a people—challenge our sense of humanity.

But we are *true* to our North Star. We remain steadfast—following the star to Bethlehem, like the Magi, then returning home—taking that light and profound mystery of what we've seen and heard *with* us—back to our village. Into our new lives in a new year. A new season of the heart in community.

I. GIFTS UNDER THE TREE(S)

Today is the day for bringing our gifts, once more to the Manger. The gifts of our spirit, our prayers for the

coming days and year. We come to the Manger, come to Jesus, one more time. We drop to our knees (metaphorically, if the bending is just too hard for us!) and offer not only our homage and devotion, but our commitment—in partnership to work, serve and love *with* Jesus all year long.

What gifts will you bring?

Will they be different this year from other years? Will they be different from others' gifts—perhaps from a new place in your own heart—touched in new ways in these times?

A friend and colleague from seminary, Ryk, grew up in a likely typical, and somewhat troubled family dynamic in Ontario. He shares this story of “two trees” for us to ponder the nature of our gifts, giving and living.

A tale of two Christmas trees. (Rev. Ryk Brown)

I grew up with a strange tradition of having two Christmas trees in the house as a kid. One upstairs in the living room that was **artificial**, perfectly decorated with colour-**coordinated** decorations. We even had to put the **tinsel** on one strand at a time to avoid **clumping**. The living room was always perfectly clean and never allowed to be cluttered. This was the "**outbox**" tree with gifts for people outside our family. This is what guests saw.

The other tree was downstairs in the family room. This was a **real** tree with **mismatched** decorations that were not colour-coordinated. Many of the decorations were home-made. Tinsel was thrown on wildly in **clumps**. The tree was **chaotic** and the room was frequently

cluttered. This was the "inbox" tree with gifts for us that only family or close friends saw.

It took me ages to realize how these trees were a **metaphor** for how we were taught to live our **lives**, especially emotionally: outwardly perfect, coordinated, tidy...and **fake**. Inwardly chaotic, cluttered...and **real**.

Today we have one tree. Most of the decorations match, but not all of them. Some are beautiful, others are ugly, all are **meaningful**. The world sees both the good and the chaos, because that's real life.

II. TWO WAYS OF LIVING

Clarke and I were musing on this story the other day, and we both laughed when we remembered scenes from our early years (probably the same era as Ryk's Upstairs/Downstairs Christmas Trees! Clarke had relatives who had a wonderful, plush, expensive, sink-your-toes-into wall-to-wall carpet in their master suite, that was covered, wall-to-wall in visqueen!

Yep! I kid you not. No bare feet ever got to enjoy, sink into, or curl toes around that lush rug. It was protected with plastic. Removed from real life.

I had next door neighbors who had an upstairs living room (where very little living occurred), and a downstairs living room. They had six kids, so this might have explained it! The upstairs living room had couches and chairs completely covered in plastic—not just slip covers that you would pull off when company came!

As a neighbor kid who would knock on the door and come over to play often, I would look with awe and slight disbelief at that "parlor" where no one ever sat on the furniture, and quickly retreat to the family room downstairs, where the couches and floor were cluttered, full of toys, games and TV. And comfortable!

Two trees. Two paths (or more!) to choose how we give our gifts and live our lives. Will we present our "outbox" "nice for company" image? Or, will we be ourselves—comfortable, real, and a little cluttered?

III. MAGI GIFTS from TWO TREES

The gifts the Magi brought were different, as well, and served different purposes. Two of them—frankincense and myrrh—actually came from two different trees! That's an interesting tie-in.

These two were literally gifts of *sap*—straight from trees. Worth as much as gold, and even more rare! They both had medicinal properties:

Frankincense has been found to contain anti-inflammatory properties, cancer-fighting elements, anti-aging tendencies and even testosterone-like effects! (I wonder if those two things are related!)

It's soothing and calming. Heals chest infections and coughs. (Some of our church family could use some right now! I've brought some I got from Debra Hogan when I couldn't sing before a concert!)

Myrrh was a painkiller—useful for toothache, though I understand the taste is nasty! Good for healing skin irritations. And, of course, a way to anoint, honor and embalm the dead. Myrrh was what the women brought to the tomb to anoint Jesus when they thought a body was still to be found there on Easter morning.

WHAT WILL WE BRING TO JESUS IN 2020?

It's a new year. God calls us to come to the manger. To bring *our* gifts—the gift of our prayers and ourselves—our own real, true hearts and lives—and as we do, to open ourselves and our lives and hearts to a new way—in a new year—to what God wants to do in us and through us..

What will *we* bring?

Sweet smelling frankincense to reduce inflammation and ward off dis-ease?

Caring salve; a healing balm of myrrh—to honor, value and anoint one another as God's beloved children?

Treasure of our time and energy to our Lord and our community?

The Magi, after they brought their gifts, had a dream. In the dream, they were impressed upon to “go home by another way.” To strike out on a new path, a new route after this new revelation of God’s presence in the world.

What is the story we will tell in this new year? In our individual lives and in our communal life together?

How will we live in these times, on this road ahead? Upstairs or downstairs? Upstairs with the “public parlor,” under the plastic slipcovers and visqueen

carpet, or downstairs with the family, the clutter, the carpet we can sink our feet into, the couch we can snuggle with the dogs and kids on? Maybe even spill things from time to time!

Will this new path be an authentic, beloved place to be real? Or a fake tree with too-neatly-cutout-and-matching ornaments?

We bring the gift of ourselves. Our messy, full-of-foibles and clutter; of shortcomings, clumps of tinsel and casually-thrown together decorations. Not your plastic, too clean, no clutter, artificial, color-coordinated, off limits, plastic slipcovers kind of lives.

We come now, with the gift of ourselves, to this Communion; to the Table. Real—not the fake or artificial or covered-up-for-company souls that we are, and gather together.

One, in the Body of Christ. Humble before our Maker. Seeking and finding, following the Star that leads us to the Light of the World. Come to Christ’s Table. Come as you are. Amen.

STRIPS OF PAPER – Prayers in Basket/Hymn

What I commit to in the new year, in my beloved Community

What Gift will you bring to the Manger this new year? Or come up after service and put in the Manger and offer a prayer as you place it.

Or, take it home and keep it close by as a reminder of this day and what you offered as your prayer for the new year. My gift, my prayer this year to Jesus.