

“Opening Our Treasure Chests”

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Matthew 2:1-12

The Christmas presents have been opened and enjoyed
or exchanged for the right size
or packed away for next year’s regifting.

The live tree—if it’s still up—is so dry you’re afraid to turn the lights on
for fear of spontaneous combustion.

Christmas decorations have disappeared from store shelves,
already replaced by Valentine’s candy and probably St. Patrick’s Day hats.

Christmas has come and gone.

And once again, the church is behind the times!

Everything around us says Christmas is over,
and here in the church we’re celebrating Epiphany Sunday,
the arrival of the magi, the so-called wise men.

Much speculation regarding this story has taken place over the centuries.

Was there really a star and was it
a comet or a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn or—I even heard tell of it—
a UFO?

Were there three wise men just because three gifts were named?

And who were they, anyway?

The NRSV translation calls them wise men, but most translations use “magi.”

Of course, the experts disagree on exactly who and what that means.

Although the beloved carol we will sing in a few minutes calls them kings,
they weren’t actually kings.

Many scholars say they were philosophers and astronomers,
since they studied the stars.

Other scholars claim that the magi were Zoroastrian priests.

If so, they may have earned the title of wise men

“because of their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology.

They were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes.

They were scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor....

The primary prophet for Zoroastrianism is, of course, Zoroaster.

Zoroastrians believe that he was miraculously conceived
in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin.
Zoroaster started his ministry at age of 30
after he defeated all Satan's temptations.

(I assume this sounds familiar!)

Zoroaster predicted that 'other virgins would conceive
additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded.'
Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell these miraculous births
by reading the stars.
Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior."¹

Regardless of who the magi were,
we're also left with the question about those gifts.
We always assume that the first gift, gold, represented wealth.
The second gift, frankincense, was a perfume or incense.
In Jesus' time frankincense often was burned
whenever a lamb was being sacrificed in the temple,
so some preachers have claimed that frankincense
represented Jesus' future rule as sacrifice for our sins.
Finally, the magi gave Jesus myrrh, another fragrance.
It was often used to embalm bodies
and was given to medicate those in pain, including at crucifixion.
This gift, more than the others, seems to foretell what is to come.

So the wise guys brought symbols of wealth, sacrifice, and death.
Not such great baby gifts.

I've always assumed they packed those gifts before leaving home,
with the intent of giving them to the child.

But listen again.

The story says, "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."

Opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts.

¹ Niveen Sarras. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3931

Maybe gold, frankincense, and myrrh were simply
 what they had in their treasure chests,
 what they had packed for the journey.

After all, gold wasn't as rare then—in fact, it was quite plentiful in nearby areas.
 They used tons of it to build the temple.

Gold wasn't valued because it was monetarily valuable—
 it was valued because it was beautiful.

Its most common use was in jewelry and ornaments.

Maybe the magi had it with them because it was their jewelry,
 or maybe it was to be used as gifts in their travels
 or to be traded for a night's stay.

Frankincense comes from the boswellia tree in the form of resin.

These trees are so hardy and tenacious that they can sometimes grow
 directly out of solid rock.

So if you're looking for metaphors, the frankincense
 could have represented the ability to bring life in barren places.

More importantly, perhaps, is that easterners used the resin as medicine,
 particularly to aid in digestion, heal wounds,
 and purify the atmosphere from germs.

Burning frankincense even repels mosquitoes,
 protecting people from mosquito-borne diseases.

This would have been very helpful on a road trip.

Then there was myrrh.

Over the centuries, myrrh has been used to treat kidney dysfunction,
 stomach pain, circulatory problems, and—
 when combined with frankincense—
 used as an ointment for arthritis.

Another helpful thing to bring on a trip.²

So what if, instead of intending to bring the Christ Child such strange gifts,
 they simply opened their treasure chests and gave what they had,
 what they had brought for the journey?

² Most of this information on frankincense and myrrh comes from wikipedia. Additional information, including the traditional understandings, comes from a variety of sources, including “What Our Gifts Say About Us,” a sermon by Pastor Steven Molin on lectionary.org

I like this idea.

Taken literally, what I might have to offer from my suitcase
would be a phone charger and AirPods.

However, I do actually take myrrh and frankincense on every trip
because frankincense and myrrh
(along with chamomile, peppermint, and lavender)
are in the essential oil I use to fight motion sickness.
So I might offer it as a gift of compassion to another traveler!

But speaking metaphorically rather than literally,
what do I have to offer the Christ Child?

I have a little money—
a pre-determined percent of my income that I give to the church.
I have time—too much of which I waste playing games.
I have some writing skills and some gifts in speaking—
which I try to use for God's glory
but occasionally is at least partially for mine.
I have a tendency toward sarcasm—I'm not sure how God can use that—
and a desire to help others find their way in God.
That's what is in my treasure chest.
It's what I have to give.

I have a deep love for the nativity set I grew up with,
and when Jackie and I were first married, she kept asking me
why my nativity set didn't have the little drummer boy.

I reminded her that the little drummer boy is not in the story.
He does not belong in my nativity scene.

She insisted that he belongs.

I thought she was just being silly,
because growing up differently than I did,
she probably knew more about the drummer boy
than Luke chapter two.

But finally she told me why the little drummer boy was so important to her.
When Jackie was very young, her family was quite poor.
They never had enough money for the basics, much less the extras.
One year they only had a Christmas tree

because her father stole one from the lot on Christmas Eve,
after the place had closed.

Her parents also sold their plasma in order to provide Christmas dinner.
After her parents separated, things got worse before they got better.
They lived one summer in a tent at a campground.

For a brief period of time they lived in a closed diner,
and for one week even lived in their car.

The little drummer boy taught her that you didn't have to be rich
to be able to give.

You just had to give of yourself.

And that is what she learned to do.

We now have a little drummer boy in our nativity set.

He doesn't match the other figures, but he definitely belongs.

Generosity is part of our treasure chest.

What do you have in your treasure chest to give to God? to give to the world?
And don't tell me "nothing." It's not true.

What do you carry with you or within you that can be given as a gift?

Even if it's only sarcasm and a desire to help others—
whatever it is, whatever you have,
it is pleasing to God.

But you do have to open that treasure chest and share instead of hoarding it.

If you keep hauling it around with you,
saving all that treasure for a rainy day,
it's going to become a heavy burden.

Share the gift. Share the love.

It may not be myrrh. It may be even better.