

January 9, 2022 Epiphany Sunday

There's a comic that's been circulating in recent years that points out that if Jesus and his mother Mary had been visited by a group of wise *women,* they would have brought more practical gifts, like diapers, casseroles and toddler-appropriate toys.

But there's also a very real possibility that there already were wise women among the well-wishers and visitors to the boy king. And that's not only based on the fact that the Magi were willing to stop and ask for directions once they had reached Jerusalem. The term Magi is non-gendered in Greek.

It most likely in this case refers to priests of the Zoroastrian faith hailing from Persia and in that tradition, there is evidence of ordaining women to priestly roles and recent archaeological discoveries have helped spark a renewal of that practice in communities in modern-day Iran.

Beyond that, the practical value of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, three gifts brought by an untold number of givers in Matthew's narrative, is perhaps not obvious but significant. This gold, the item most familiar to us, went to great use as legend has it. It would have financed the holy family's escape to Egypt when Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocents, boys under the age of 2. He went to that Plan B after his attempt to locate and assassinate the Messiah was thwarted ... by way of the Magi applying their wisdom to interpreting dreams and skipping their return visit to Herod.

Frankincense is less apparent in its significance but it was used in fragrant offerings to the Lord and signified acknowledgement of Jesus' royal status. A beautiful, if not most handy gift, has its place. I think of when Liana was still a number of weeks away from being born and I participated in the Tuolumne County Library Trivia Bee. Our team from the newspaper took second place — and we would have won

if not for an awful decision made by the judges in the final round but that's probably a better anecdote for a future sermon about forgiveness and letting go of senseless grudges.

What we did win as luck had it in the door prize raffle was a beautiful pink quilt that wouldn't have made as much sense walking away with anybody else present that evening. It helped soothe over some of the frustration our whole team felt but it also was too nice to just be a baby blanket. It hung in the wall for a time ... and Liana still has it.

But it's not as treasured as her mass-produced but sentimentally special heart-dotted blanket. She got that the night we left her with our friends and neighbors to go to the hospital and have her first baby brother born. But from a parent's perspective, I will happily endorse a gift for my kids that I like more than they do.

The last gift given to the child Jesus and his mother is myrrh. It's also the most obscure. Scholars of the Bible and

antiquity point out that myrrh had antiseptic and pain-relieving effect. Mark tells us the wine offered Jesus while on the cross was mixed with myrrh. John names it as a burial spice used to embalm him before his body is placed in its tomb. It could have been used for those inevitable childhood bumps and bruises and scraped knees in addition to its symbolic foreshadowing.

There are a lot of different aspects to the gifts that were given to Jesus by his first Gentile admirers. And their virtues range on scales of utility and fun and sentimentality. But the gifts we have to offer God are varied as well. And they aren't limited to three, nor to the number of us gathered. Some of us can give more than others. Some of us are gifted in many ways and some of us have just one thing or two, but are very good and very strong in those gifts.

Now admittedly, we are in the midst of a stewardship campaign in which you've heard a lot about gold, metaphorically speaking. And financial gifts have obvious

impact and pragmatic value. But there are other ways to give to the family of God. We aren't a big smells-and-bells church but the wisdom that incense represents swirls about this place and is shared. The gift of song is one we offer passionately and we lament when we must damper it in light of the ongoing threat of COVID-19.

And when we consider our gifts, I think we can recognize that like myrrh, it is good to give what might not seem as significant now but can be useful and meaningful in the years to come. It might seem a simple thing to sing a song you love, alone in your car with great gusto, but the time will come when you can sing it just as emphatically with your neighbors and siblings in Christ again, unhindered by a mask and without hesitation.

Ordinary gifts don't get as much attention. But I know there are gifts to Christ that went unrecorded then, now and during all the time in between. Surely, some neighbors and relatives baked bread for the family, washed clothes, held the

infant or watched him to make sure he didn't toddle into trouble. Just because they didn't make the edit for the abridged version of the story doesn't mean they are not valued, treasured and importantly, *seen* by God to whom gifts great and small alike are dedicated.

If you feel like you have nothing to give, I challenge you to recognize that really, yes, you do. And God might see it before you even notice or understand it. We all have received an invitation to come and meet Jesus, bringing what we have to greet the Lord, with no need to worry ourselves sick about what we don't have. No pressure to look around and compare our gifts to others'. We all have something and in God's eyes, it will always be enough. Amen.