

The Gifts of the Magi
Matthew 2:1-12
January 4, 2009

On May 9, 1961, the Dave Brubeck Quartet recorded a short piece at the Thirtieth Street Studio in New York. It is called “Charles Matthew Hallelujah,” a tune that burst into being the day Dave and Iola Brubeck’s sixth son was born.

That day Brubeck stopped by the hospital in Norwalk, Connecticut, on his way to a recording session in the city. When he arrived at the hospital, he learned that Iola had just given birth to their grand-finale son. When Brubeck finally arrived at the studio, he told the band the good news, went directly to the piano, and started playing.

Light notes announced the birth. The saxophone, bass, and drums responded with joy. The song was inspired and recorded on the spot, but listening to it today we might think every note was meticulously placed and well rehearsed.

When she first heard the piece, Iola Brubeck said it sounded as if each band member was presenting her newborn with a gift. Paul Desmond on saxophone. Eugene Wright on bass. Joe Morello on the drums. This spontaneous gesture of these “three kings” of the 1960’s jazz scene are reminiscent of the gifts given to another babe born centuries before.¹

How many kings are mentioned in Matthew’s story? Two – King Herod and the king of the Jews! Three gifts are mentioned – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That’s where the idea that there were three magi emerged, but Matthew doesn’t tell us how many magi there were. It could have been two or ten or more. Our focus today is the three gifts offered by the magi.

In the ancient world, gold was a symbol of pledging loyalty to a king. If you were meeting the king of your country, you would bring gold as a sign of your loyalty. In the seventh century B.C. the king of Assyria compelled the King of Israel Jehu to submit to his authority. The record describes Jehu as paying tribute in the form of gold, a golden bowl, a gold vase, golden tumblers, golden buckets. The gold was a sign of his loyalty.

Today businesses issue gold cards to their loyal customers. If you are a gold card carrying member, you are likely to get special treatment or extra perks! Gold rings are exchanged in wedding ceremonies as symbols of loyalty.

The gift of gold presented by the Gentile magi is a bold and astounding statement of their newfound loyalty to the king of the Jews. They are making a radical shift of allegiance. “Lord” was a title applied to the Emperor Caesar. When the first Christians declared, “Jesus is Lord,” the implication was “Caesar is not.” They pledged their loyalty to Jesus at the risk of being found unfaithful to the Roman law. The gift of gold is symbolic of such loyalty.

Frankincense is a fragrant gum resin. The small white chunks and beads of frankincense can easily be ground into powder. When burned it emits a balsam-like odor. It is an ingredient of the incense considered holy to the Lord in the act of worship. In the Jerusalem temple, frankincense was set before the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the temple, where it was symbolically closest to God. Priests were anointed with oil and one of the four ingredients in the anointing oil was frankincense. Incense evokes a mystical sense of uniting heaven and earth, divine and human. With that mystical union comes a feeling of harmony. The gift of frankincense is an offering of thanksgiving for God's close presence in our lives.

Myrrh is also a fragrant resin found in oil and solid forms. It signifies cleansing and purification. It was thought to cleanse the body and soul from impurities, kind of like a "spiritual soap" in the ancient world. It was used in anointing dead bodies. John's gospel says that Nicodemus brought 100 pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloe to anoint Jesus' body for his burial (John 19:39). The gift of myrrh is an offering of cleansing and purification.

These gifts are exemplary of offerings made by disciples of Jesus Christ. Gold symbolizes our loyalty and allegiance given to Christ above all else. Frankincense is an expression of our thanks for God's presence in our lives and of our longing to grow close in relationship to God. Myrrh expresses our desire to be pure, to allow the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit to wash through body and soul that we might be a holy and fragrant offering fit for God.

One of the beautiful things about this story is that there was a gift exchange. While the scripture is not specific, we are told that the magi were so moved by their encounter with the Christ child that they changed their travel route. They did not return through Jerusalem and risk interrogation by King Herod who was threatened by this new king of the Jews. Instead the magi went home another way.

In his book called *The Christmas Eve Storyteller*, Edward Hays imagines personalities for the traditional three wise men as they return home by a different route. Each had been on a personal quest. Balthasar went seeking nobility. Melchior sought some way to escape death. Caspar called himself an agnostic king. Though skeptical, he sought a religious experience that would confirm the existence of God. He especially had been disappointed by the shabby stable, the crying infant, and the peasant parents.

Each came with an expensive gift and left with something more precious. Hays ends his story in the words of the magi:

"I, Balthasar, have seen the beginning of a new age, the end of a time when only a select few are given reverence, treated as gods come to earth. I have seen the end to kings and queens as the anointed ones, for now every person will be seen as royal, unique, and possessed of great dignity."

“I, Melchior, have seen the death of death. Now I see only life in countless forms of transformation.”

“And I, Caspar, what have I seen? I have seen God, and now I see God everywhere!”ⁱⁱ

In return for their devotion to Jesus, the magi received the gift of royal dignity, the gift of the precious nature of life, and the very presence of God. Their lives were forever transformed by God’s gift of Jesus the Christ.

As we embark upon a new year, may we be bold to offer gifts as precious as those of the magi: our loyalty to Jesus Christ, thanksgiving for the harmony God provides, and a desire to be purified by the healing Holy Spirit. As we offer ourselves so completely to God, we will find ourselves forever changed, our lives enriched, and our pathways leading to deep fulfillment.

ⁱ Dave Brubeck, *Dave Brubeck Time Signatures: A Career Retrospective* (Sony Music Entertainment C4K 66047; compact disc, 1992). Quoted by Andrew Nagy-Benson, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, ed. By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 194.

ⁱⁱ Edward Hays, *The Christmas Eve Storyteller* (Leavenworth, Kansas: Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc., 1992), pp. 46ff.

The Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA