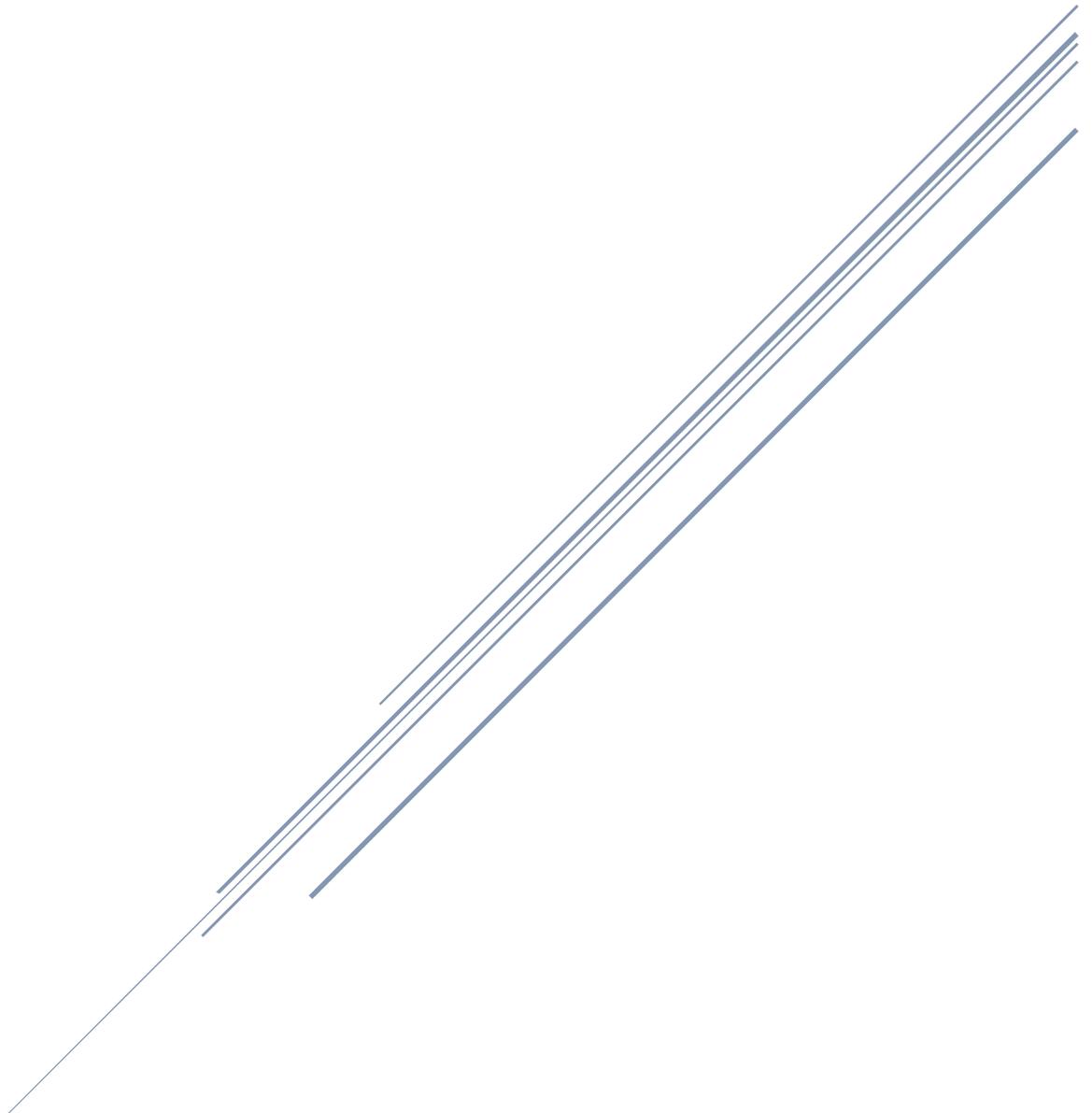


WHAT ARE YOU BRINGING?

Matthew 2:1-12



January 3, 2016
Pastor Brad

I've been telling a lot of stories lately. I love stories. Stories help us to see how ancient wisdom is still relevant to us today – right now. Stories are part of us; even when they're not about us – they're about us.

I found the most wonderful story this week about the wise men. If you're anything like me, one of the first things you think of when you think of the wise men is the children's pageant. I think of when I was one of the three kings who had to sing one of the verses all by myself every year on epiphany, and this story really brought it back to me.

Little Joey's mother, like all the mothers of the three kings, was responsible for crafting the gift her wise son – or daughter – would bring up the aisle and present to the baby Jesus. That particular year, Joey's mom really outdid herself. Inside an elaborately carved box that his dad had brought home from one of his trips to the Middle East, resting on a bed of purple satin, Joey's mother had put a block of wood, carefully wrapped in shiny gold gift-wrap. It absolutely sparkled. Joey sure seemed impressed by it; he was constantly opening the box and showing it off to his fellow kings.

They say that if the rehearsal doesn't go well, the performance will be great. Well, during the dress rehearsal, Joey strode up to the manger and mother Mary, opened his box and proudly sang his verse in his clear soprano voice: "Gold I bring to crown him again..." It was flawless, so naturally the director and the pastor were a bit concerned that since the rehearsal went so well, it could only mean one thing.

Sure enough, on Sunday morning somewhere between home and church, Joey misplaced his golden treasure. Joey was undone as he ran to his father in tears, wailing that all was lost – he had no gold to give to the baby Jesus! All he had was an empty box lined with purple satin.

Let me interrupt this story for minute with another story, told by author, speaker and nun, Joan Chittister. She tells the story of a Sufi master who was found sifting through the sand in the middle of the road. Some pilgrims passed by and asked him, "What are you doing?"

The old Sufi looked up and said, "I'm looking for my treasure. I've lost it."

So the travelers all dropped to their knees to help look for the old man's treasure. They sifted through sand. They turned over rocks. They were working up quite a sweat under the midday sun, until one of the pilgrims asked, "Are you sure you lost your treasure here?"

"Oh no, no," said the old Sufi. "I didn't lose my treasure here; I lost it over on the other side of the mountains, over there."

The pilgrims looked at him sort of sideways and said, "Well, if you lost it on the other side of the mountain, why in the name of Allah are you searching for it here?"

The old man said, "I'm looking for it here because there is more light here."

How often do we find ourselves looking for our lost treasure, expecting that what we lost will be found exactly where we left it? I can hear my mom now when I'd tell her I couldn't find my shoe or my books or my trombone – “Where'd you leave it?”

We keep going back to that place where we think we last held that treasure – the one that made our lives better. But sometimes our treasure has moved, or changed -- or we've changed -- and our hopes of finding it right where we left it turn out to be empty longings. Our treasure isn't there – it isn't where we think we left it, or where we expect to find it.

We gaze up into the night sky, like the wise men, desperately seeking the star that will illuminate our lives again, or for the first time. But the light that we need isn't up there; and even if it could be found in a star, we need more than a single star to light our path. We need something brighter – more intense than some far off star if we're going to find that treasure that's going to enable us to live life more fully and more abundantly – to be more alive.

So let's go back to the story and shift our gaze from the night sky, and look more closely at the wise ones who journeyed to greet the newborn Christ child. It's kind of hard to see past the star, isn't it? We know the story so well, it's almost impossible to find a new way of seeing.

Think about the nativity scenes you've seen: there they are, three men in full kingly regalia, kneeling, bowing, offering gifts to the child – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. I've always imagined they picked out their gifts before they left home. I mean they've seen this star so they packed up for a long trip across the desert, probably on camels with an entourage who knows how big. But it says they came to worship or to pay homage.

The Greek word here is *pros-kineo*, meaning to kneel or prostrate oneself as an expression of profound reverence. - From *πρός* (*pros*) – a preposition indicating direction, like near, by, to, towards, and a probable derivative of *κύων* (*kineo*), meaning to kiss, as a dog would lick his master's hand)

There's nothing in the definition of *proskineo* about giving gifts. Maybe their intention was to pay homage, not to bring gifts. I've done it – you show up at a party or something without a gift and at the last minute you're scrounging around in your car or you run to Walgreens for a last minute gift – something suitable.

They would literally have a ton of supplies and treasures with them, probably to trade for necessities – because you can't carry everything for a trip that long!

So they arrived at the cave/stable, and there he was, a beautiful child in whom lay the hopes and dreams of a world gone mad with violence, greed, and lust for power. This child was the hope of the world.

Moved by what they saw, overwhelmed by their encounter with the beauty of this child in the squalor of the stable and the insanity of the world, they scrounged around in their camel bags and gave out of what they had– which may have actually been more for the poor parents to barter with than for the child. They gave of themselves. They gave out of the stuff they needed for the

trip home as gifts for the child – overcome by hope for a future filled with something different from the way things had always been.

Little Joey was overcome with grief over the missing gift. It was too late to go home and have mom make a new gold brick. The play would be ruined! All was lost! Where did he last have it? He traced his steps meticulously, looking everywhere he had been. He couldn't find the treasure he was expected to bring. It wasn't where he thought it he left it.

Tears in his eyes, he went to his dad who did the only thing he could do. He scrounged around, digging deep into his own treasure to find a suitable gift. He opened his wallet and looked at the bills – maybe money, a couple twenties, would be appropriate – modern gold?

And then he saw it; the most precious treasure of all. It was a bit battered and worn from spending time in his wallet, but it was his most valuable treasure. He placed it on the purple satin in Joey's fancy gift box for the boy to give to the baby Jesus.

When it was Joey's turn, he sang his verse, "Gold I bring to crown him again..." He bowed regally and he lifted the lid of his beautifully carved box, and even the little baby in the manger smiled up at him as he offered up the treasure inside. The audience never saw it, but it was a treasure more valuable than gold. Nestled there, on a bed of satin, was a dog-eared and slightly faded picture of little Joey.

We spend too much time gazing at the heavens, looking for that star, hoping that our treasure lies there, waiting – waiting to be presented to us by some great king in the sky. But the truth is closer than we imagine. The truth is that our treasure can't be found up there, out there. No matter how hard we gaze into the starlight. Our treasure lies inside us, waiting to be given to a world that needs the treasures that each of us has to give.

Shift your gaze from the heavens, and from the manger; for the light of the world shines out from you. Look around you and you'll see it – the light of the world shining out from your neighbors. You are the light of the world. Shine forth – the world needs your treasures.

What a great image: like the Magi, if we scrounge around in our baggage, we'll find the treasures this world needs. We've spent too long looking into the heavens for it.

The most profound words spoken in the nativity pageant aren't, "I bring gifts..." but "Do not be afraid"... "Fear not."

Let me finish by repeating this piece that I've read before, by Marianne Williamson:

*What holds us back in our lives is our fear.
And sometimes when you take a very close look
you find out that your fears
aren't exactly what you thought they were.
Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.*

*It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves,
who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other
people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest
the glory of God that is within us.
It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.
So it's holy work to move past your own fear.
It doesn't just help you.
It helps the world.*

Who among us hasn't said or thought those lines? Who are you to be brilliant? To be gorgeous, talented, fabulous? But, who are you not to be? You are a child of God – Fear not! Open yourselves up and give the world the treasures it needs. Arise, shine – for you are the light of the world.

Amen.