

## ***"Precious Gift"***

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, may the humble words spoken and the thoughts and feelings of those who hear, open for us a New Year of growing closer to you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

A poor, rural man complained to his minister, "I'm in desperate need of help, or I'll go crazy. We're living in a single room: my wife, my five children and my in-laws. So, our nerves are on edge, we yell and scream at one another. The room is like hell."

"Hmmm. How many animals do you have?" asked the minister. The desperate man replied, "A cow, a goat, two dogs and six chickens."

The minister instructed, "Take them all into the room with you. Then come back after a week."

So, the man took the animals into the crowded single room. A week later he came back, moaning, "I'm a nervous wreck. The dirt! The stench! The noise! We're all on the verge of madness!"

"Go back," said the minister, "and put the animals outside."

The man ran all the way home. He came back the following day, his eyes sparkling with joy. "How sweet life is! The animals are outside. The home is a Paradise, so quiet and clean and roomy!"

Happy New Year! Nothing has really changed, but we have received a precious gift that offers us a new beginning and a home in Paradise!

In our passage from the prophet Isaiah today, Terry read that "the glory of the Lord has risen upon you," there will be great rejoicing and abundance, and "they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." The gift of myrrh, a bitter perfume that was often used at the time to prepare dead bodies for burial, isn't mentioned by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, but it is mentioned by Matthew. Matthew tells us that wise men from the East came to Jerusalem following a star that stopped over Bethlehem. And when they found the

child Jesus, they opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And unlike our beautiful, but crowded nativity scene that agglomerates the birth narratives, Matthew describes a different night than when the shepherds visited the newborn baby Jesus. The wise men arrived sometime after Jesus was born, they knelt down to pay him homage, left precious, but impractical baby gifts, and then skedaddled back to their own country by another road!

History might have been much different if it had been three wise women. The wise women would have asked for better directions, they would have arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, arranged some fresh flowers, made a casserole, and brought useful baby gifts like receiving blankets and diapers!

King Herod was frightened when he heard that wise men from the East were looking for "the child who has been born king of the Jews" for they had "observed his star at its rising." When King Herod asks the chief priests and scribes where the child was to be born, they reply by referring to verses from Second Samuel and the prophet Micah who reveal that the child will be born in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of King David. There's also a so-called "Star Prophecy" in Numbers that "a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." King Herod was afraid that the new king foretold in the Old Testament prophecies would challenge his Rome-appointed role as King of Judea. King Herod must have believed the prophecies, because later in the second chapter, Matthew reveals that King Herod, after realizing he had been tricked by the wise men, "killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under."

The biblical birth narratives highlight that Jesus was born into difficult times. There was the new registration that required Joseph, descended from the house and family of David, together with Mary, his very pregnant fiancée, to travel to Bethlehem, the city of David. There was King Herod's massacre of young children in and around Bethlehem. There was oppression by the Roman rulers who collected taxes and maintained strict laws, publicly punishable by cruel crucifixion. Even the religious leaders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, imposed rules for

everyday Jewish life and punished those who violated their interpretations of God's will. First century life was difficult and the Bible includes many distressing stories of evil rulers, violence, oppression, poverty, and disease.

There have been similarly distressing stories in the newspapers to start off our New Year: "Pandemic dampens New Year celebrations around the world"; "Bodies pile up, patient care falters as COVID-19 devastates L.A. County hospitals"; "NASA tracked an asteroid big enough to end civilization this year"; Ethiopian security forces killed at least 76 in summer unrest"; Rebel attack leaves at least 25 dead in eastern Congo"; "South Sudan faces famine threat amid floods"; "Trump tweets conspiracy ..." Nope, I won't get into the mayhem of US politics! Despite different millennia; there are similar distressing stories.

But there's also a major difference. Unlike the newspapers, the Bible is full of stories of God's grace, acting to counter human distress in a world where we are called to foster hope, peace, joy and love. Isaiah speaks of the glory of the Lord and that "you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice." This glory shone down from the heavens telling the shepherds of Jesus' birth and guiding the wise men to Bethlehem. There was an overwhelming feeling of goodness and righteousness; the holiness of the Messiah; the epiphany of the Son of God foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Star of Bethlehem was a miraculous sign to mark the birth of the Son of God, the Messiah. Modern day astronomers have made attempts to link the Star of Bethlehem to unusual, but explainable, celestial events such as the rare conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, or a comet, or a supernova. Regardless of origin, the Star of Bethlehem is associated with the epiphany of God's love made manifest in a vulnerable little baby. The epiphany is foretold by Old Testament prophets; by angels to Mary and Joseph; by angels to shepherds watching their flocks; and now to gentile wise men from the East.

The gentile wise men were scholars of science and astrology, not religion, and they knelt and offered costly gifts as they paid homage to the child Jesus, as they would for a king. It must have been an unusual experience for these foreign, wealthy, non-Jewish magi; paying homage to a young child and not completely

comprehending the significance of the Hebrew Scriptures or of the great astrological signs that drew them toward the child Jesus. For the wonder of this child transcends religious barriers, transcends cultural barriers, and transcends economic barriers. The world witnessed an epiphany of God's love for all in the birth of Jesus: an epiphany of good news to Jews and to gentiles, to the West and to the East, to wealthy kings and to poor shepherds, to Jesus' contemporaries and to us.

It was interesting for me to get new socks for Christmas. One of the most precious gifts that we gave out to homeless youth when I went out on Thursday evenings with the Light Patrol outreach team in downtown Toronto - is new socks. The youth we met and got to know well, survived by walking around in ragged and holy shoes, sleeping in downtown doorways and under bridges, and even if there was a rare opportunity to take a shower, their socks would get wet, dirty and very smelly. The last thing that you would want to do is touch these wet, dirty, smelly socks, and there is no way you can get them clean again. So, we gave the homeless youth the precious gift of new socks along with food and caring conversation and social support. With new socks, the troubled youth would have a new beginning of sorts. Together with our precious gift of new socks, we prayed that God would give them the precious gift of a new beginning in the troubled world in which they lived. It was also a precious gift for me, to get to know these precious youth.

The wise men gave precious gifts to young Jesus. Little did those magi know that it was that little child who was giving them a precious gift. The precious gift of insight into God's love for all people. The precious gift of hope and peace and joy and love. The precious gift that is given freely to all in the midst of our human difficulty. The precious gift of Jesus, enlightening the world with good news in an epiphany of God's eternal love for us. We have been given a precious gift. Thanks be to God. Amen.