

GOLD

The story of Jesus, as we know it, begins with His baptism. *“Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.’”* (Mark 1:10-11) That is the true Christmas.

Jesus was born of the Spirit, as He said we must also be if we want to participate in His Kingdom – in His life, in His love, in His purpose.

“Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.’” (John 3:3-8)

Unlike some theologians, Jesus speaks of what He knows and has experienced. The whole purpose of the Incarnation – the coming of Jesus to our planet – was to open up for us a new and living WAY. We believe God sent his Son as one of us, that we might follow Him into this new WAY. But God coming to us in this manner is tougher than we want to realize. It must be authentic, or it turns into a charade, a puppet show. Yet it must also carry the dimensions of the LIFE to come. Jesus must truly be *one of us*, or we cannot truly follow. If we just want Him spiritual and ethereal and other-worldly, then why would He bother to come? If He comes with other-worldly power and identity far beyond us, He is no more relevant to us than the Creator God we can surmise but never see, draw close to, or follow. On the other hand, if Jesus knows no more than we do – if He has no new light or power or purpose to bring to us – then why would we follow Him? So the Incarnation is mystery mixed with practicality – a man closer to God than we have ever seen before, yet still totally one of us.

Sometimes I go to churches away from here. They have all these mysteries totally figured out, locked down in nice creeds, and wrapped up with a nice pretty ribbon. We all recite the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed (which was invented three hundred years after Jesus' apostles were gone), and we pretend that we understand all about who Jesus is and was, and where He came from. And I go home wondering: Do we sound like that here when visitors come to worship? God forgive us. Lord have mercy. There are so many "developments" that try to make the mystery and the love more clear, but they end up obscuring more than they reveal. They often put more distance between us and a true response to who Jesus is, and what He really means to us personally.

When my son-in-law Russell was dying of ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), he could still drive and walk, on a good day, but he could no longer talk. Communication was via an electronic box – he typed the words, and the box spoke them. Russell asked me to come over one day so just the two of us could talk. My daughter said he wanted spiritual guidance. Russell had read some of my books and sermons and knew some of my quirks, and he said he wanted a short-form summary of what Christianity was really about. He was particularly troubled because of his inner reaction to the name "Jesus." He had heard it used most of his life in such a disagreeable way that it caused a severe negative reaction inside whenever he heard it. Now time was running out. He had gotten past a lot of his earlier aversions, but this one was still bothering him. The Lutheran church he belonged to was both helping and hindering his faith. He said he hoped he wasn't putting me on the spot.

It was every preacher's dream. He could barely talk, but he was eager to listen. I wish I could share with you the next three or so hours, including his comments and facial expressions. But in essence I told him that like me, he would have to get past all the things people say about Jesus, and get back to what we can piece together from the Gospel records. Russell studied the Bible a good deal, by the way.

Secondly, I told him he needed to delete the Virgin Birth, which is a later add-on, and the Second Coming, which is a tag-on from before Jesus ever came. Most Christians won't let go of either one, no matter what Jesus said, did, or taught. I reminded Russell that, for example, sermons and teachings about the Book of Revelation and the Second Coming sound exactly the same as apocalyptic scenes and teachings from before Jesus ever came here. He may as well not have bothered

coming. And when John tries to tell the apocalyptic vision in a dramatically new way to match the life and Message of Jesus, we insist on turning it back into exactly the same old message we had before Jesus arrived.

So I said to Russell what I say to anyone who will listen to me: The core and heart of our WAY is prayer – the Holy Spirit with us, guiding and directing and comforting us. That is the life Jesus really lived. Jesus brings us the possibility of turning life over to the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit. *We can follow Him* into baptism, and New Life. The rest of the story, so dramatic it obscures the real message for many, is about not letting Satan, death, or Hell – any of the pressures we all find in this world – steal this New Life away from us. Jesus saves us *from* Sin (which is separation from God), and saves us *for* God – and for the LIFE God has designed for us – by showing us that we no longer have to be afraid of anything in this world. There is nothing they can do to steal us away from God, who will raise us up on our last day here.

The Cross is not the aim or goal. The Cross is execution. The Cross is symbol of the worst the world can do to us. But the Cross could not control Jesus. If we follow Him, we cannot be controlled either. Christianity is a profound revolt from within, and into a different and altogether better realm. What does Jesus say to the thief on the cross beside Him? “Hey, if I twitch hard enough, maybe I can sprinkle some of this blood over onto you and you’ll be saved.” Hardly! What Jesus does say is: “Without fully realizing it, you are claiming me and my WAY of Life, and today you will be with me in Paradise.” (bvbV) The Cross is *not* the good thing about Christianity – it is the very worst. The Cross shows us how the world reacts to the goodness of God. Only, without even meaning to, the Cross also shows us that we can choose our Lord, instead of choosing this world.

I know, I know. It’s supposed to be Advent, not Lent. As you know, I always get the two confused. That’s because the same Lord, and the same Message, rules both – in mystery beyond our full comprehension. The Holy Spirit IS our Resurrected Lord – with all of us, in all places, at all times – whenever and insofar as we will allow it. *Immanuel* = God with us. Apart from that, everything else is just the trappings, make-believe, lies mixed with sentiment – and much of it is misleading. This life of obedient prayer and devotion is most rigorous; it threatens the life of the world as we know it. It was not social action or political

revolution that got most of our great leaders killed – it was prayer: putting God ahead of all other earthly authority. Christmas as most people know it never converts anybody; it's too pretty and nice and warm. Sensing who Jesus really is and then trying to follow Him into the rigors of baptism – and a life of prayer lived for God – *that* is what converts people. And that is not about creeds, pretty white steeples, or church programs intended to seduce new members. It is about a new kind of LIFE, and a serious desire to live it.

Being born of a virgin destroys all that. Jesus is no longer one of us. None of us were born of a virgin, nor can we ever be. But we *can* be born of the Spirit, like Jesus was. Whether with water or spirit or both, we can turn away from a life that is willful and separated from God. All of us know that kind of life, and have lived it. But like Jesus, we can die to the old life and be raised to the New Life – and we too can hear God's reassurance: "You are my beloved daughter" or "You are my beloved son." And like Jesus, we can come up from that "water" into dedication, love, and devotion for God like we have never known before – like we never dreamed was possible.

Christmas as we know it destroys all that. It tries to trade the mystery of the Incarnation for a miracle of smoke and mirrors that has never called people into authentic life in Christ Jesus. In all the long history of my ministry, Christmas has never helped to strengthen the faith community, nor has it helped any individual to become a true follower of Jesus. It has been a pleasant distraction at best. More often, it has thrown people off-course entirely. I believe Christmas has done this from its beginning. The veneration of Mary is not the same as devotion to Jesus Christ. No matter how much we may appreciate art, architecture, sentiment, or generosity, it is not the same as turning will and life over to the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

Somebody tacked new stories onto the beginnings of two of the Gospels. It was not the same person. They did it hoping to enhance our veneration of Jesus. They did it thinking they were finding authentic information from Old Testament prophecy about the birth of the expected Messiah. They did it in response to the hunger of Greek and pagan cultures to know more about the auspicious birth of somebody important enough to be the Savior. But the stories are inconsistent with each other, and they do not match the rest of the information of the Gospels they are

attached to. They fly in the face of an earlier and stronger tradition and teaching that still remains in the writings of the New Testament itself.

Jesus is alive and here, present as Holy Spirit, so that He can be with each and every one of us no matter where we go. Jesus wants each of us to know a LIFE far beyond what we could ever imagine without Him. Jesus wants us to follow Him, be with Him, converse in constant prayer and collaboration about everything we are doing and everything we care about. He never controls or influences without permission, but He is always willing and eager to transform and redeem whatever of ourselves we are willing to bring to Him.

If we bring that part into Christmas with us (the “Immanuel” truth – the “God with us” part), then this will be the best Christmas we have ever known. If not, it will be the same old distraction – a few days of holiday break and, for some, pleasant family gatherings – but nothing in our lives will change. Focus on the baptism: on the voice – the calling – that tells you how loved and special you are, and which then commissions you to be part of the ongoing story of God calling ALL of us – all of his children – home. The virgin is only a distraction and is never real. It is a mistranslation from *almah* (in Hebrew) to *pathenos* (in Greek). Isaiah simply wrote “young woman” (7:14), but in translation from Hebrew to Greek (Septuagint version) it came out “virgin.” (“Virgin” in Hebrew is *bethulah*.)

There is truth in myth and legend. The errors do not mean that their authors didn’t love Jesus. They told beautiful stories. That’s part of the problem, isn’t it? We love some of the stories. Only, more and more the meaning of the stories themselves is obscured by the hype and secular frenzy of Christmas time. To begin with, you cannot homogenize the Luke story with the Matthew story without losing the meaning of both. Even good myth has internal authenticity, a pattern, and principles that it is trying to reveal. If you know more than one story, they may enrich each other. But if you mix them together, you end up knowing neither. And you do have to let the myth keep its own truth. That is, you must pay attention to how it is shaped and told, or you lose the very message it is trying to proclaim.

Matthew’s story of the wise men is an almost perfect illustration of myth gone bad. As the story is actually written, I have great appreciation for it. It moves me, and I know it speaks deep truth. It is compelling as a profound parable of how true believers will respond to the coming of

Jesus. But as I hear it portrayed in modern Christmas – in story and song, and in the proclamations and sentimental slush of most (though not all) Christian worship services – there is hardly any connection left to the very truth it is trying to portray.

First of all, you have to get all the shepherds out of the story, and tell them to take their sheep with them. There is no manger. The cattle are not lowing. The story takes place in a house. And there are no angel choirs. The atmosphere is somber and filled with danger (not the wild celebrations of Luke). Herod is alarmed, and the wise men are realizing with ever-greater clarity that they are endangering the very life of the infant they have come to worship. They are now moving with stealth and haste. They are still eager to find and honor the propitious child, but they are also eager to melt away before Herod's agents can track them to find and kill the baby. **The story is saying that this child is born into deep danger, and that this danger will always surround His life in this alienated world.** The one who wrote this story knows how the real story ends, and he is building that truth back into his original story. Lots of people go clear through Christmas and never remember – never take it to heart – that the world did not recognize Him, and even His own would not receive Him. That truth has not greatly changed in all the years since.

Stop and think a moment. Our entire culture goes through huge celebrations and antics every year at Christmas time. But the essence of this story is that Jesus is in danger: He is not recognized or welcomed or received. Don't you detect some inconsistency here? Is it not the height of irony? We think perhaps that the struggle is all over with, in our time? That the whole world is now all gushy in love with the Savior? And that the real celebration is because we have all finally devoted our entire lives and all of our choices, motives, purposes, and fortunes to the will and guidance of Jesus Christ, our true and rightful King? Oh my friends, if our joy is not mixed with tears at Christmas, we haven't the faintest notion of what the real Christmas is about.

In any case, Matthew's story takes place at least ten years before Luke's census and the burro ride to Bethlehem. If there are camels, Matthew's story does not mention them. If you are trying to elude Herod's agents, you probably don't want to be conspicuous with camels. And the wise men are not kings, they are seers – astrologers, if you take the literal

translation. The star means Jesus has a birth chart unlike any other person who ever lived. But we won't get into that.

What most offends Matthew's story – and what is most necessary for all of us to correct in our minds if we want to hear his message in any meaningful way – is the part about three wise men. The moment we posit three wise men, we miss the most important truth the Matthew birth story is trying to proclaim. The story does not say anything about three wise men. The story is about **THREE GIFTS!**

No translation on the face of the earth says anything about three wise men. *“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.... Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.... And after having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.”* Did you hear anything about three?

Here is the thing about three: *“After coming into the house they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they fell to the ground and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”*

What is the very essence, message, and purpose of the story? That if you recognize His coming – if you have any awareness of the magnitude of what has happened – you will come and worship! You will bring **ALL THREE GIFTS!** Everyone who recognizes Jesus will end up awestruck – they will end up recognizing that this is the greatest person ever born among us. But even more to the point: Everyone who recognizes Jesus will end up bringing three gifts to Him. Not one gift per person; **EACH OF US WILL BRING ALL THREE GIFTS.** That is the real point and purpose of Matthew's story. What is our response to the coming of the Messiah? Our response is symbolized and embodied in these three gifts. If you do not bring all three of these gifts, you do not recognize Him. If you bring only one of the gifts, or even just two, your awareness is only partial. Your response cannot bring you into the fullness of the New Life in Christ. The lovely little popular corruption of three wise men, each bringing one gift, undoes the very meaning and essence of the story itself. I'm sure nobody meant any harm by this. It was a simple, careless device for making it easier to deal with the story. (And perhaps easier to keep Jesus from having any great impact on our lives.)

In any case, the corrupted symbol matches the confusion of the church. People think they get to choose which of the three gifts they want to bring. So most bring frankincense. Far fewer bring gold. And only a tiny handful bring myrrh.

Of course, the fact that all across the world, Christians of every persuasion are bringing only one of the three gifts – and are thereby missing the dynamism and delight of the Christian WAY – you think perhaps that’s harmless too? And hey, two outta three ain’t bad, right? But as always, when we play games with God by *our* understanding instead of God’s, something vital and crucial is always left out. Half-dedicated Christians are *not* halfway to the Kingdom; they have not yet even found the WAY.

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” (Matthew 7:13-14)

Wise men bring all three gifts. All sincere followers of Jesus bring all three gifts. And the first gift is gold. Do you want to talk about gold? For those who bring all three gifts, it is the easiest of the three. That doesn’t mean it is less than profound. But we have no choice, do we? If we want to welcome the Messiah, we bring gold. Do you bring gold?

We brought gold, or at least pledged it, on Covenant Sunday. There is a direct connection, if in truth this gift was tribute to our King. And that is what we said it would be, or at least what we wanted it to be. But Matthew’s story goes to the source and core of stewardship: It is not just the amount of gold, it is the meaning of gold itself. GOLD DECLARES HIM KING. You always bring gold to your king. You give him a crown of gold, that he may have wisdom and a pure heart. We don’t know such things anymore, but Matthew did, and his whole world did.

The wise men do not bring gold to Jesus so that He will have a little money to fall back on in hard times. It is not to make him rich. (He comes richer than this world can imagine or comprehend.) Gold declares Him King! Yes, it means that Jesus has rights over our material resources. It means He has a right to determine what we build, and do not build; when we go to war, and do not go to war; what all of our efforts should be toward, both individually and collectively. Gold declares Him King. The gift of gold is a declaration of political, social, and personal allegiance.

In our kind of world, the ramifications of this allegiance are endlessly confronting and confusing us. But our intention is not confused. The first gift says, with eloquent simplicity: “We will obey and serve You. You are our King, and there is no other.”

The Roman Empire said: “Caesar Augustus and his successors are gods, and they are your true king, and you will swear allegiance to Caesar or we will kill you.” And the Christians replied: “So kill us. Our God reveals himself in Jesus Christ, and HE is our true King. We have no other. And His Kingdom endures forever.” The result, of course, was that many of them died, at least in this world. We cannot say they were murdered, since the only viable state declared them enemies of the state and executed them for treason. But they knew the story, and what it meant to bring Him gold. That was what *Immanuel* meant to them – not some pathetic little play-at-being-nice-and-generous for three weeks, then back to business as usual in January. Gold declares Him our King. Once we bring Him gold, Christmas never ends. What could end it?

So you see, it doesn't matter how the wise men got there, how many there were, or what their names were. The more details we try to tack on, the more we distract ourselves from the real issue, and from the real meaning of Matthew's story: Will we or will we not bring Him gold? Gold declares Him King. And that is only one of the three gifts we bring.

FRANKINCENSE

Who is the greatest man who ever lived? I will give you a hint. He was given many wondrous titles: Prince of peace; King of kings, and Lord of lords; Savior. Though appearing as a man, after his death he was officially declared a god. I speak, of course, of Gaius Octavius – Caesar Augustus. In the early first century (as we count), nearly everybody knew that Octavius had earned these titles. He had brought peace and prosperity to the whole known world. Life wasn't perfect, but the Roman Empire was far-flung, and opportunity was far greater than it had ever been before. Who had brought such a miracle to the world? Octavius Caesar! No ethereal Savior was he. His legacy was written in temples, cities, armies, and ships from Briton to the Caspian Sea – from the entire north shore of Africa to the Syrian desert.

I quote: “He was bringer of peace and prosperity to the inhabited world.... The birthday of the god [Augustus, born on September 23, 63 B.C.] was the beginning of the GOOD NEWS [gospel] to the world on his account.”

Augustus reigned forty-four years. Jesus was somewhere around twenty years old when Augustus died (at age seventy-seven) and Tiberius Caesar took over in one of the smoothest transitions in history (14 B.C.). Augustus had engineered this also. Truly he was admirable: A great moral reformer. He had no interest in personal luxury. His domestic life was simple and homespun. His devotion to his wife, Livia Drusilla, remained constant. He restored temples and built new ones all over the Empire. And of course, a few years later, in the world of the early Christians, there were temples built in his honor in nearly every city of the Empire.

Why am I telling you this? This was the world in which Jesus died, and in which Paul preached, and into which the Christian church was born. I ponder that sometimes. A tiny group (at least tiny at first) of very unimpressive, essentially powerless people began saying here and there: “Folks, we have it wrong. Augustus is not the greatest man who ever lived. In fact, all those titles and greatness really belong to a Galilean carpenter that we crucified – without hardly noticing it – one spring day in an out-of-the-way corner of the Empire. But Jesus was and IS the true King – the rightful owner of our world, our worship, our adoration,

our allegiance. It is not Caesar Augustus who can save us. It is Jesus, the peasant from Galilee.”

Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?! Augustus had sixty Roman legions at his beck and call. No one anywhere would have dreamed of taking on his navy. He had more wealth and power than the world had ever seen before. They said he found Rome in brick, and left it in marble. Great cities across the known world were blessed because of him, and would have done anything to please him. When he died, the whole Empire went into deep and extended mourning. Who would compare a Galilean spinner of parables to the might and glory of the greatest Emperor the world had ever known? And who in their right mind would try to claim that Jesus *did more for people* than Augustus Caesar?

It has always been our dilemma, has it not? We try to measure success by the measurable. “If it seems to be working in the outer world at the moment, it must be right.” I even know some rich people who so worship money that they think money is what poor people need the most. (Not opportunity, or training, or jobs, or confidence, or respect, or faith, or love. Or, God forbid, a Savior.) Money will save them. And some church organizations are so far from their own faith that they agree with this.

So God keeps sending us Jesus. But more than a few of us say, “Thanks, but we would actually prefer the cash.” Hence, modern Christmas.

When a story gets loved well enough by enough people, it carries such power that everybody wants to tack on their own agenda. That way, they hope the power of the story will carry their agenda along with it. It’s kind of like being good friends with a very famous person. We hope a little of the aura will spill over onto us. So we name the three kings, and say they are from different races. Then we can turn Christmas into a story against racial prejudice. Or we make up “the other” wise man or do *Amahl and The Night Visitors*, so it can be a story about helping the poor. Or we try to change it from the miracle of Incarnation into a miracle of generosity. Or it’s about playing on your drum; or about jingle bells; or about a drunken reindeer who nevertheless leads us through the night, so it’s okay to get soused on Christmas Eve. Anything to distract us from Jesus – to distract us from the coming of the Savior.

Matthew loves Jesus the Christ with all his heart. He is not writing a computer manual, or a diary of events. He is writing a love-tribute to Jesus – to the One he names Savior, and Son of God, and the greatest person who ever lived. Chief rivals to these titles, in his world: Moses from the past, and the reputation of Caesar Augustus in the present. Most of you know the parallels with Moses: Pharaoh kills the babies; the flight into Egypt, that Jesus may come out of Egypt. Moses frees from Pharaoh's bondage; Jesus frees from Satan's far greater bondage. Moses leads us into the Promised Land; Jesus leads us into the Kingdom of God, a far greater "Promised Land," which is forever. Jesus is the new Moses, and far greater than Moses. Clearly that is what Matthew's Gospel proclaims from start to finish.

But Matthew also takes on Augustus Caesar – Prince of peace, King of kings, Lord of lords – who was proclaimed a god by the Roman Senate on September 19, 14 A.D. No coins were being minted with a likeness of Jesus on them, but the very heavens have proclaimed Him. That is the whole point of Matthew's special star. "*We have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.*" (Matthew 2:2) The magi were in the East, and the star was in the West, of course. "Westward leading, still proceeding." The magi were tracking a special star that "*went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.*" (Matthew 2:9) This is a first-century-A.D. story. If you think it is history instead of myth, you will try to make it match twenty-first-century reality. A star by any definition that you know, if it tried to behave this way, would blow the entire solar system into smithereens in a nanosecond – at least according to any of the laws of physics as we know them. Then we miss what Matthew's star was trying to announce: that Jesus was great beyond imagination or duplication.

By the way, the special star was a stranger and more poignant miracle, in the first century A.D., than the part about the virgin. The ancient world knew lots of virgin births. (The Zoroastrian version was the best.) But the star claims power and uniqueness for this child beyond all other signs and portents. Sometimes I am called "Scrooge" because I keep trying to trade a false Christmas for the real one. The star as fact is silly. But the *meaning* of the star? That I believe with all my being. God forgive me, but I keep hoping that more and more people will come to believe its meaning as much as I do.

Anyway, the people told stories of the greatness of Augustus and what a propitious birth he had. To which Matthew replies: God created a special star just for Jesus' birth, so that no other earthly horoscope ever can or ever will be able to match it. Top that, Augustus lovers! What is Jesus' sign? Well, God made a new sky for His birth, and no known sign can describe or contain it. *That* is what Matthew is proclaiming.

So we come to the gifts. That is, we come to the part about our response. Matthew tells this story to proclaim who Jesus really is, and to tell us about the appropriate response for anybody who recognizes who He is.

Some of you have not been Christians for very long, and big words like "incarnation" don't seem friendly or helpful yet. "Incarnation" is *very* friendly. You have heard of *chile con carne*? Yes, of course: chili with meat. See? "Incarnation" is simple: God comes in the meat – in human flesh – in Jesus of Nazareth.

What are we trying to understand this Advent season? You don't have to agree with anything I tell you; this is a Congregational church. I just like it to be clear. It causes a lot more trouble that way; it also has more of a chance to change and redeem us.

Let's assume, for the moment, that Christmas is for Christians – for those who *already* believe. Nobody has ever believed in the Christian Faith because of Christmas. We believe because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and because of the encounters we still have with His Holy Spirit. Christmas celebrates what we *already* believe. For those who do not believe, Christmas is a secular holiday with no connection to the Christian Path or WAY. Is that not obvious wherever you look around you?

Christmas is SYMBOL AND CELEBRATION. Go with the symbols ... go with the meaning ... sing your heart out ... give gifts with great love ... ponder the mystery ... let the Christ into your heart more deeply and more truly than ever before.

But you cannot play with SYMBOL AND FACT at the same time. Christmas is SYMBOL AND CELEBRATION. Enjoy it! Glory in the symbols. Rejoice in that which points to what Jesus means to us. Christmas is poetry, not math. It is truth, not science. By the way, science does not seek truth; it seeks facts. And a million facts can never

add up to a single truth. The fact is that Jesus was born and did live in this world for about thirty years. Lots of people know that fact, yet it carries no meaning for them. You want some Christmas facts? I have lots of them. Here are a few:

The first celebration of Christmas on December 25th was in Rome in the year 325 A.D. That means the first eight or nine generations of Christians survived just fine without Christmas. They also formed the church and converted the Roman Empire without Christmas. Christmas is not essential to Christendom in any way. It is symbol and celebration. It is after the fact.

By the way, Eastern Orthodox Christians still celebrate Christmas on January 9th, and Armenians celebrate on January 19th. Does that sound like precision? Matthew thinks Jesus was born in 4 B.C. or earlier. (Herod died in 4 B.C.) Luke thinks Jesus was born in 6 A.D. or after. (Quirinius became Governor of Syria in 6 A.D.) We know all about the factual details of Jesus' birth, yet we cannot even get within ten years of when He was born? (How old are you? "I don't know, somewhere between thirty and forty. Nobody paid any attention at the time.")

However, if we have shifted from fact to full celebration, then the symbols matter. That is, the images and the stories and the way we celebrate are all supposed to reflect the meaning of what we celebrate. Just because we move from fact to symbol doesn't mean we get careless – quite the reverse. If you give a gift that has no meaning, you ruin the message. You went back to fact. The fact is, there are thirty-five people on my Christmas list, and I gotta get 'em all something. A book for this name, a shirt for that name, and so on. "There – thirty-five presents for thirty-five people and I'm finished. Whee!" What is the celebration? "I did my duty, so nobody can fault me"? That's terrific. Jesus would be so proud. Well, it *is* part of our kind of Christmas, just not the meaning part.

So some of us pay more attention than ever to the stories and symbols. Is poetry less thoughtful or more thoughtful than prose? If the story says three gifts and we think it says three kings, we are going to miss the meaning of the story. So we are thoughtful and alert. That is part of the fun of the celebration. If Luke tells about a Christmas where the Great Prince of the Universe is born and nobody knows it, is there not truth to that? The angel choirs are turning cartwheels and singing until the heavens ring, but earth is oblivious. And the angels

tell only a few shepherds – only the humblest folk they can find. Nobody else is really very interested anyway. Yes, it is still that way. Hell, they couldn't even find a place to stop and give birth, except out in the barn behind the inn – a manger, for Christ's sake! But no time for Luke's story right now.

Matthew tells a story where everybody knows – King Herod and all Jerusalem with him – and they are all troubled because they might lose their power and position, might lose their vested interests, might have to change some things. God is always a terrible threat to who we are and how we do things here, and many of us would rather kill God than get to know him. Yes, it is still that way.

Symbol and meaning can be a lot tougher than fact. One year I heard some of our church decorators complaining about the fact that the red of Christmas fights a little with the purple of Advent. They couldn't think of any color alternatives, so they just left it. Sometimes the only alternative is to leave it and learn. Often the symbols speak whether or not we are ready to hear them. The red of His bloodshed is incongruous with the purple of His royalty? And without a word, the symbols can break our hearts.

Back to the gifts: The second gift is frankincense. Remember, all of us are supposed to bring all three gifts. There are not three wise men; there are three gifts. At least that is the point of Matthew's story. All people who recognize and love Jesus bring all three gifts. It is the true celebration of Christmas.

Frankincense is a clear, yellow resin exuded from trees belonging to a certain species of the genus *Boswellia* (related to the terebinth), which is native to India and Arabia. In other words, frankincense is tree sap. It is harvested in much the same way as maple syrup, except the milk-like juice hardens when it comes into contact with air. So if you bought it unprocessed, it would come in teardrops or irregular lumps of solid gum resin. It is used in perfumes, as medicine, of course as incense, and especially in sacred religious rites. In Luke's Christmas story, you remember that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was chosen to offer the incense in the Most Holy Place in the temple, and that was when the angel visited him. Well, he would have been burning frankincense in the Holy Place, as one of the most special and pleasing things they could think of to do for God.

Now, before the literalists among you book passage to India so you can find some frankincense for Christmas, let's suppose that, like gold, the gift of frankincense carries a symbolic meaning. Frankincense, as we mentioned, was burned as incense in the Most Holy Place of the temple, and it was often mixed with the sacrifice. But (and this is interesting) it was forbidden to use frankincense with any sin offering. (Leviticus 5:11; Numbers 5:15) Why? Because **frankincense was for joy**, for pleasure, for pleasing God. You see? Do not try to make God happy about your sins – do not try to butter him up, distract him, bribe him, or hide the sin under a smiling face. Deal with it straight and get forgiveness. Afterwards, you can come to God for joy and pleasure – and then is the time for frankincense.

FRANKINCENSE DECLARES JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST. Only, He is Priest of joy and celebration – of pleasure, and wonderful conversations, and all the most beautiful aspects of relationship. Some of us have a somber notion of priesthood. We keep forgetting that the temple was the great, sacred restaurant of ancient times. The priests were holy cooks. The sacrifice was cooked on the altar of God – made sacred – so that people could share a sacred meal (a feast, a banquet, a party) with God. Judaism was never a somber religion by nature. The priests were in charge of celebration. The big guilt-thing at the meal is a Christian invention.

The gift of frankincense is the offer of real joy – joy in God's presence, and enjoyment of each other's company because God is with us: laughter, and games, and unaffected hugs; and "have some more wine"; and "did you hear about what happened last Thursday"; and "I can't think of anyplace I'd rather be, or anybody I'd rather be with – especially with you, God."

We are three-dimensional creatures, and we are supposed to be three-dimensional with God. Somber and serious has its place, but it is only one-third; it cannot make it alone. The Pilgrims wore three-cornered hats to remind them to be three-dimensional, and they weren't nearly as somber as some of you think. How many times does Jesus talk about banquets in the coming Kingdom? Some of us have things all out of proportion: Hell is only mentioned 13 times in the entire New Testament. The Kingdom – where people share and love and eat and rejoice together – is mentioned 154 times. Perhaps we should try to emulate that same ratio in our own thinking and attitudes.

I know many people who get surprised when they finally realize that this is a broken world, alienated from God. They get surprised that joy is still part of our Path – our WAY. We get more and more joy the longer we walk our Path, only we attach it less and less to this world, and more and more to the Kingdom that is here and coming.

Some of us have been withholding frankincense in our gifts to Jesus for years. We neither enjoy His company nor let Him lead us into true joy. We are too busy with guilt, duty, obligation, responsibility. And besides, Jesus is only Savior Emeritus – it's up to us now to save the world.

We light the Advent candle of joy, but who would ever guess we mean it, by the looks on our faces or the way we sing and celebrate? And when we do cut loose to have fun, we often tell Jesus to wait for us outside and we'll get back to Him later.

Jesus is our joy! His Kingdom is our hope and life! How do we know Jesus' Empire still exists? That's real simple: We know because we are among its citizens. We know because we bring Him the gold of our allegiance, and declare Him our true and only King. (Last week's sermon.) But if our souls are comforted and satisfied with small and temporary assurances, we do not yet bring frankincense to Jesus. We go looking for our own joy. And we know from past experience that it is a counterfeit joy – a pretense we try to keep up.

So now we seek a true Savior, and a much greater and deeper joy. And so we bring frankincense. Because we read the Gospels, we know that Jesus loves to party. And some of us are finding, more and more, that He IS the party! He is so mixed up with everything that lights our lives, we cannot imagine where we found joy before we knew Him. And so we bring frankincense.

MYRRH

Three gifts to celebrate Christmas. Three gifts for the Christ Child. There are not three wise men – there are three gifts. And all of us can bring these gifts if we truly want to. It is one of the greatest blessings of the Gospel. Jesus never asks from us what we do not have. How many times He has had to remind me over the years! I get to thinking that I am never enough, and that I can never do enough or bring enough. But that is always Satan whispering in my ear. Satan is the Accuser. (Revelation 12:10) Jesus reassures, forgives, accepts, encourages. Jesus always builds bonds between us with what we *do* have and what we *can* bring. How wonderful, and reassuring, and encouraging – almost like He is the King of love and grace. The kind of gold (allegiance), frankincense (gratitude), and myrrh (we'll get to it) that is appropriate, we all have. Just like all of us have enough to purchase the pearl of great price.

With Jesus it always comes down to our willingness, never to demands we cannot meet. This is hard to get used to, or really believe, since all around us there are requirements, expectations, debts, and demands both seen and unseen. They drive us to fear and guilt and pressure and anxiety, until we can no longer treat ourselves or anybody else like we truly want to. Our world does not run on grace and love. It runs on Law – debts, guilt, demands, justice – and on the fear and anger that come from that. Even if we feel okay at the moment, we know that at any moment we may come up short – be found inadequate, insufficient, unworthy – and be cast away. The world even plays some of these themes on purpose, just to see if it can get a little more out of us. What a huge relief, what a huge gift, what a huge delight to shift to a new King – and a different Kingdom. If we know who this child is, we bring three gifts. We have them to bring, though mostly we have been bringing them to the wrong places and giving them to the wrong people. Oh yes! Among other things, Christmas is an emancipation proclamation. Whee – we are free of the old bondage! And to celebrate this freedom from guilt and fear, we even get generous enough to gift each other.

The Christian Way is more than intellect. But it is not supposed to be less. “*Worship the Lord with all of your mind.*” Worship also with heart, and soul, and strength. (Mark 12:30) I always thought that meant

all of them, all of the time, all of them together. I don't mean I *do* that, but I thought that was our desire and aim. I keep running into people who want to worship for a little bit with the mind, then put that away and worship for a little while with the heart, then put that away and bring out the soul, and so forth. And then put them all away for a while and go back to what they call "the real world." Then after a while, trot out the "with all your strength" part and go thrashing about to make things happen. Isn't that an interesting phrase: to *make* things happen? But we often try it, just in case it really is true that we get saved by our deeds, by how much we accomplish ... and not by love and grace. My mother used to inquire, with her own special brand of sarcasm: "Are we killing snakes today?" She did not mean "we," she meant "you," but that was how she put it. It meant I was expending enormous energy and getting nothing done, and had I noticed that?

The Christian Way is more than intellect, and Christmas is a huge conglomerate of thankfulness, allegiance, passion, and wonder. Like the Advent candles say: it is HOPE, and PEACE, and LOVE, and JOY. I know I do not present Christmas the way some of you are used to, or in the way some of you would prefer. In years past, some folk have accused me of being the Grinch. But I am the polar opposite of the Grinch. You see, Christmas has already *been* stolen, at least from most people, by the commercialism and trivialization and cynicism of our time, especially the cynicism that pretends to "believe" because of the custom, but not because of any life-changing conviction. Even lots of churches tell the story with no more life or imagination than this dried-out crèche scene. Too many people just go through the motions. But that is *never* enough! Each year, Christmas is for renewal – new insight, new power, new joy. The dimensions are endless, and even last year's wonder is not enough. On Christmas morning, we are going to wake up to the presence of our Lord more than to anything else in life. And everything else that happens will bask in that light and take on new depth and greater meaning because of it – because of Him: Jesus, Lord and Christ. Either that, or it means so little that it is a true insult to who He really is, and why He came.

May I remind you one more time: Jesus is not the Prince of "Peace On Earth." He is the Prince of "Peace between us and God." He is the Great Reconciler. Christmas symbolizes a new reality that is ours in Christ. Jesus did not promise "peace on earth" – not ever, not to anybody. Jesus did not have peace on earth Himself. He was

in constant conflict throughout His ministry, and He was crucified here, however hard that is to remember. Since Christmas celebrates His coming and all that He means to us – and since we call him the “Prince of Peace” – we need to be especially mindful. “Peace on earth” is a careless translation – a very misleading phrase. It promises a false hope and has a false aim. It will betray anyone who tries to believe it. What Jesus *did* say was: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” [sword = division] (Matthew 10:34)

Jesus also promised us that if we believed in Him and followed Him, we would have even greater conflict here on earth. “*If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*” (John 15:18) Yet every Christmas, I see the phrase everywhere – on cards and posters and in the music – and I hear it in conversations all around me. “Peace on earth.” But that is not the Christmas proclamation.

What was the greatest theological embarrassment of the early church? It was this: The Messiah was not what anybody expected the Messiah to be. Messiah was supposed to be a warrior/monarch in the line of King David who would come with physical might, defeat all enemies, establish Israel as ruler of the world, and usher in ... peace on earth. Early Christians were stuck trying to explain why they believed Jesus was the Messiah when He had done none of the things Messiah was supposed to do – when instead He fiddled around healing a few individuals here and there, and telling some really annoying parables. Then He made His bid for rulership without any army to support Him – and ended up dead.

Do you have any Jewish friends? I mean, Jewish friends with whom you can have a serious and honest conversation? Ask them why they do not believe Jesus is the Messiah. To this day, their final and conclusive argument is that there is no peace on earth – that if Jesus had been the true Messiah, there would be.

Well, much of the early church tried to cover this awkwardness by claiming an imminent Second Coming when Jesus *would* bring peace on earth. He had not done it yet, but after the added fancy footwork of death and resurrection, He would get with the program and do what we all wanted and expected of the Messiah, complete with battles, gore, judgment, and killing all the bad guys. No more of this grace and forgiveness stuff, and trying to convert and redeem everybody. At first they said

that this Second Coming would be at any moment. But when it didn't happen, they said it would take place within a few years. Then they said it would be before the current generation had died out. After two thousand years, some churches are still saying it: Any day now He is coming. He'll be here soon. Peace on earth is just around the corner. Love is just a ruse for the interim; let's get with the judgment. Nobody can tell us our idea of Messiah is wrong – not even Jesus ... or Easter!

Increasingly, the Christian Movement realized that Messiah was not what we expected – it was not about peace on earth, but about a very different kind of peace, and a Kingdom not of this world. And the purpose of Jesus' coming, at least in this world, was not the close of the age, but the creation of His church – an alternative WAY of Life in faith families spreading everywhere on earth. If we love Jesus, we are "His body" – His church here on earth. I keep hoping that more and more people will realize this and stop going for the big showy stuff. We settle in with patient endurance to be the church where we are – to honor our Lord in the way we go about our work, our relationships, our recreation, our caring ... everything that we do. We do it with humility. And some days are very frustrating. We cannot keep from being eager for a better realm. But true disciples sign up for the long haul – day in and day out, in season and out of season – faithful obedience for as long as God leaves us here. Whenever we try to impress each other (or ourselves) with size, glitter, miracle, or fabulous antics, it always turns out to be a sideshow. God does not have to impress us. Everything that is, or ever will be, has come from him. So God just waits for us to realize that we need and want to be with him no matter what it takes, no matter what the cost.

Intentionally or unintentionally, a lot of what passes for the Christian Message in our day is a lie. One of the big ones: He is not coming again; He is already here – as Holy Spirit. The next phase is not for Him to come back here in some physical way, but for us to go there in some grand and wonderful spiritual way. But that's another sermon.

Myrrh, like frankincense, is sap exuded from a special kind of plant. One form came from the Cistus, or rockrose, of Palestine itself. But the most precious myrrh came from Commiphora myrrha – a shrub-tree native to Arabia and East Africa, and imported at great expense. Myrrh was used for a wide variety of purposes: spice, medicine, cosmetics, incense, and perfume, as well as for religious purposes. It was one of the

ingredients of the anointing oil of the High Priest. Queen Esther used it for her beauty treatment. (Esther 2:12) Myrrh, pulverized into a fine powder and placed in a sachet, was worn between a woman's breasts, as we learn from the Song of Solomon 1:13. Both myrrh and frankincense are used as highly erotic symbolism in the Song of Solomon, which luckily none of you read anymore. You have problems enough as it is.

Why do the astrologers in Matthew's story bring myrrh? More to the point: In symbol language, why would anyone who is wise, and who recognizes Jesus' true identity, bring myrrh to the Christ? I mean, aside from the fact that it is costly? (Matthew 26:6-13)

Look out the window. Daydream. Think about the game on television. Do anything, but don't listen to me – or more importantly, to Matthew – from this point onward. If you do, it will forever ruin the happy, shallow American Christmas.

Matthew says that one-third of Christmas is myrrh. If you bring only gold and frankincense, you cannot have the real Christmas, wondrous though those gifts are. I know that some of you do bring myrrh; I hear it in the way you phrase things, and I see it in your eyes. But some of us do not bring myrrh yet. And without bringing myrrh, we are not a true church.

Myrrh is for embalming. Myrrh knows He will die for us – knows He will die *because* of us. Matthew's wise men know what Matthew knows. And Matthew has seen the full drama of Jesus' life on earth. Yes, this is the greatest birth of all time; they come to rejoice, pay homage, and worship. They also know He will be killed – that, directly and indirectly, we will kill Him. This baby is "he who must die." Not because God ordained it, but because we are too lost and frightened and angry and alienated to abide Him. He is born into danger, and He leaves crucified. That is integral to the Incarnation and to the meaning of Christmas. Messiah does not belong here. Though He is Son of God, and our true King, this world cannot tolerate Him, cannot abide Him, cannot stand Him – and most certainly will not love or obey Him. When deep in our souls we finally know that, we bring myrrh.

No one can fully explain, but comment is required. Matthew is working on an ancient formula. Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and King. Gold declares Him King. Frankincense says He is the great High Priest. Myrrh means He is Prophet. (Frankincense and myrrh cross back and

forth a lot, and are often used together.) But *this* concept of prophet is lifted higher than normal, as are the other two titles. The prophet's task was to turn the people back from their sin – their waywardness, their disobedience, their lostness – turn them back to being God's people. The prophet was needed because we do not keep the Covenant; because we keep going off track; because of our rebellion against and alienation from God; because the vision and the purpose keep getting lost or corrupted. Repent, turn, change, purify – that was the call of the prophet. Some prophets – like Jeremiah, John the Baptist and, much more, Jesus – realized that turning from one way to another was tougher than we normally want to see or admit. Breaking out of ruts, changing old habits, shaking an addiction – even the addiction of sin, which is trying to live apart from God – always takes us into some kind of death and resurrection. If we head into true forgiveness and redemption, such patterns get very real.

MYRRH DECLARES HIM PROPHET. Only, if He is true King and High Priest, He is also High Prophet. Jesus does not *merely* proclaim; He brings the change He proclaims. The word we use for that is SAVIOR. Jesus brings with Him a new dimension. A prophet shows the error – reveals the gap between what is happening and what is right – and then it's up to the people to close the gap and correct the error. But no normal earth prophet has the power to effect the inward change which is necessary. The story of human life on earth is that we *will* to do the right, but that we *cannot* do it. It is not just that we won't; why do we always pretend to be either better than we are or worse than we are? The truth is that we *want* to do good and be good, but discover that we cannot. It is thwarted, short-lived, or incomplete, or we get something changed only to discover that there is another hidden flaw in the new plan. Oh, we do some good here and there, now and again. But it is never enough. It does not flow with consistency and power. It is a rare day indeed when I go to bed thinking I have done only good, and no harm. Are your days so different? What can redeem ... transform ... change us from within?

With Jesus, the mix of King, Priest, and Prophet transforms into a Messiah higher than we ever imagined. It closes gaps we did not even know we had. Jesus not only convicts of sin, He reconciles us to God – He heals the very alienation that separates us. This Messiah is Savior. Savior goes to the depths, and cuts beneath all merit, all performance, all deserving. Savior loves and redeems us from the lowest

depths of our worst and blackest fears. Savior does not lead, or teach, or encourage, or try to persuade us to be better by trying harder. Savior goes to the very source of sin, the flaw in our relationship with God: the anger, animosity, and mistrust that keep us alienated from our Creator. Only, that means He must go to the core of death and Hell itself and carry us out when there is literally nothing we can do. God does not help those who can help themselves. Why bother? God in Christ Jesus helps those who *cannot* help themselves. Myrrh is for sin and death and the blackness of the Deepest Void – and myrrh is for the One who can deliver us, even from that!

How can Matthew pick a gift to represent such things? He chooses myrrh, and leaves the rest to the discerning. Frankincense, you remember, is for joy and cannot be used with the sin offerings. It is used at the beautiful, joyful, and most pleasant end of life's spectrum. Myrrh is used for the sin offerings, for purification rites, and for embalming. In short, myrrh is as holy and sacred as frankincense, only it is used at the hardest and harshest end of life's spectrum. Unlike frankincense, myrrh can go to the depths of defeat and death and evil, and all that we fear most.

Doubtless, Matthew chooses myrrh for other reasons as well. Matthew knows, and therefore so do the wise men, that myrrh mixed with wine was offered to Jesus as He hung upon the Cross. (Mark 15:23) He knows that Nicodemus brought myrrh mixed with aloes when he and Joseph of Arimathea came to bury Jesus. (John 19:39) (Nicodemus must have been extremely wealthy; he brought enough myrrh to bury half the Sanhedrin, which at that point he no doubt would have been quite willing to do.) In any case, it is quite clear that by the time of Matthew's writing, myrrh is associated with Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

As in all ages, and so in ours, the many cry: "Bring more frankincense! Away with the myrrh!" We want to be happy at Christmas. And Jesus would no doubt be the first to cheer, if that were the whole story. But happy about what? Happy about His coming, of course. And what does His coming reveal? First and continually, it shows the great animosity that exists between this world and God. What then do we do with the sin – the missed, the lost, the defeated, the broken, the betrayed? What do we do with the pain, the damage, the hopelessness? We only get to be truly happy at Christmas if we are no longer afraid of death and evil – that is, if we are among the redeemed

and forgiven ... and know it. So we bring both frankincense *and* myrrh. And Jesus accepts both. Down to this very day, Jesus still receives myrrh from those who bring it. Otherwise, the burden of sin and death mounts until we are crushed by it. And indeed it does crush us ... until we learn to bring myrrh to the Christ.

The great wonder of this Messiah is that He receives myrrh from us as a gift! That which is worst in us, He changes into great gifts. That which is weakness in us, He changes into strength. What we are most ashamed of, He uses to awaken us to love. From the depths of all we most fear and dread, He brings us to the heights of hope and peace. That is not just a fairy tale or a Christmas wish list. That is the biography of the saints for two thousand years now. And Jesus goes on saying: "Bring me your worst and I will show you how it has been warped, and I will reshape it into your best. I am the Redeemer. It is what I do." The darkest within us is also the highest. There is no way we can know that, trust it, or even imagine it until we learn to bring myrrh to the Christ ... in humility, and out of our deepest need.

Will you offer Him myrrh this Christmas? Myrrh for the One who must die for you? Hard to imagine a gift so unspeakable. "Dear Friend, highest of all earth-beings – You who are advanced even beyond my full recognition, beyond my ability to comprehend – put Your life on the line so I can finally know and believe that my life has significance. Prove Your love so I will know that my life is worth something. I bring You myrrh!"

Unspeakable ... impossible ... audacious ... WRONG. It is against every form of truth or justice we have ever claimed or known. But Matthew knows the Gospel, and claims it! "Die for me. You alone have the power to overcome all that I fear, dread, hate – all that I try to escape or deny. You alone can face it, and survive it, and rise again. There is no other hope. I cannot make it if You do not come for me – if You will not bring me with You – even through the depths of death and Hell. I bring You myrrh. And in return, You bring to me the grace that goes beyond death; the secret to life that lives beyond all disgrace and defeat and failure; the power of fearless love which turns into the freedom to live for You and Your Kingdom – even in this place ... even here and now ... each and every day. I bring You myrrh."

Let the congregation weep! And finally – and fully – rejoice!

A TOTAL GIFT

Matthew has told us about a configuration of three gifts that represent the highest and best gifts that humans can bring to Christmas. But we still compare and contrast that with the gift God brings to Christmas: the Son, the Companion, the Friend, the Savior. A total gift.

Music can be a great carrier of the Word. I suppose this has always been known, but King David made it formal. He seemed to have learned on some kind of folk harp while still a shepherd boy. And then he sang the madness out of King Saul for a time. His psalms are songs as well as poetry, and as soon as he became King, he called together musicians and formed choirs to sing to God's glory. And we have been doing it ever since.

Jesus Christ not only came – He is perpetually coming. Though we celebrate a season together, your own personal Christmas is whenever He reaches you – whenever and however He breaks through into your own consciousness. It is not really a group effort or a communal affair. Community forms afterward, among those who have experienced His presence. And it is fun to remember once a year that He has come for each one of us, and that He will continue to come in ways ever new – always calling us to more light, truth, possibility, adventure.

The Christ comes with a Kingdom, in the name of a Kingdom – a Kingdom not of this world. He comes for this Kingdom or not at all. Advent means we try to prepare for His coming. We should know by now that it will come in ways unexpected, and cause us unexpected awakening. If it does not knock us for a loop, we have been duped. If it does not call for at least everything we have and are, we have been conned by the counterfeit Christmas.

The greatest learning point in history is when this Unexpected One walks into our lives. If we survive the shock – if we do not run or hide or reject – it all starts to match the secret, unpublished pattern built into our brain waves long ago by the Creator. Get the roads ready! Prepare Him room! Maybe even paint a “For Sale” sign to put up in front of your inn, just in case.

The following is just a story. At least you may take it as that, if you wish. We're not sure of its exact origins, but a version of it was read on the radio years ago by the late Paul Harvey.

A TOTAL GIFT

The man lived on a farm outside a little town in Minnesota. He was a kind, decent, mostly good man – generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others – but he just didn't believe all that stuff about "Incarnation" that the churches proclaimed at Christmas time. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus story about God revealing himself in a man, coming to earth in Jesus of Nazareth.

He told his wife and kids, "I'm sorry, but I'm just not coming with you this Christmas Eve." He tried to explain that it made him feel like a hypocrite, and that he would be more peaceful and loving if he stayed home and didn't get all annoyed or angry inside. So it made them sad, but they went to the midnight service without him.

Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries growing heavier and heavier, and then went back to the fireside chair to read. Minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound, then another, and another. At first he thought someone was throwing snowballs against his living-room window. When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably on the ground in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter, they had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He thought that if he could direct them to the barn, they could keep warm. He hurriedly put on his coat and boots and went out to open the big barn doors. But the birds wouldn't come in. He hurried back to the house and fetched bread crumbs, sprinkling them on the snow as a path to the safety of the barn. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread and continued to flop around helplessly in the deepening snow.

He tried catching them; he tried shoing them; he tried walking around them waving his arms and herding them toward the barn. But they scattered in all directions, panicked by his assaults. He was too frightening to them, and the barn obviously did not represent to them any safety or warmth that they had ever known.

The man became quite engrossed in the plight of the birds, and in his own inability to help them. "To them, I am a strange and terrifying creature," he thought. "If only I could think of some way to let them know they can trust me – that I'm not trying to hurt them, only help them. But how?" No matter what he tried, every move he made tended

only to scatter them, confuse them, make matters worse. They were simply too frightened of him.

“If only I could be a bird for a few minutes,” he thought finally, “and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn. If only I could be one of them so they could hear and understand.”

At precisely that moment, the church bells began to peal out from the valley below, announcing that Christmas had come. Like an electric shock in his brain, the light turned on. “Oh my God,” he murmured. “There was no other way.”

From that day on, he loved Christmas. And even years later, people would come to the old Deacon when they were troubled by their doubts, and he would tell them: “If you believe that a God of love exists, Incarnation is inevitable. Christmas is not just mystery or miracle or the creed of some human church. Christmas had to happen. There was no other way.”

PRAYER

O God most high, most near – open the deep places of our hearts, that our joy may not be shallow in the hour of Christ’s coming, but instead, with the knowledge of this world’s sorrow, may be uplifted and transformed by the timeless grace of His Spirit. Deliver us from all quibbling unbelief, and set us free by the swift flight of our soul’s aspirations to enter into Christmas as people humbled to a joy greater than they expected or earned.

Wherever there are children,
 may gifts be holy in the name of Christ.
Wherever there are families,
 may the coming of Your Son bring a purer love.
Wherever there are men and women of any kind or station,
 may eternal hope break in upon them.

Honor and glory, praise and joy be unto You, O God of this strange and wondrous new Peace. It is in Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

THE CHOICE

It is always amazing to me to hear the conversations that buzz about at this time of year, between Christmas and New Year's. "Well, Christmas is over," I hear folk say. In many ways, in many phrases, it crops up in normal conversations. People mean no harm. They are not thinking theologically. They are just talking and commenting about schedules, seasons changing, and what they are facing next. It is nevertheless a strange thing that Christians could even mouth the words without choking. Christmas is over? What an extraordinary thing to say! If we have any concept whatsoever of the meaning and proclamation of Christmas, how could we imagine that it would *ever* be over? What would it take to close down the coming of the Christ, to stop it, to put it to an end? Satan has been trying with might and main for two thousand years – and he gets some assistance from us, from time to time, to be sure. But closing down Christmas is a tall order. Once the cat is out of the bag, how do we get it back in? Once God reveals himself, how do we pretend to not know? Christmas is always coming, but it is never over.

So we can take down the decorations, but how do we get Christmas – *Immanuel*, God with us – out of our minds and hearts? Christmas is always coming, and once we awaken to it, it is never going away – not ever again. Even though life moves on, and seasons come and go, and shortly we won't be singing the carols again for a while (just so they will be fresh for new impact next December), still the true reality of God with us, God in our lives, Jesus as our leader and redeemer ... where would it go?

What really happens each year is that we get confronted with carrying Christmas truth into the realities of normal life, and into a mundane world where a truly great many people have never known Christmas. Once the presents are all opened and the lights come down, they think it's over because they never awakened on the inside to what the celebrating was really about. That makes us feel a little weird at times – a little out of step with what's going on around us – because we are carrying Christmas truth for the rest of our lives, trying to live by it, and live it out, every day – while most of the world around us thinks it's just a holiday: four weeks of glitter, and then gone.

What are the wise men doing as they head back home? Are they saying, “Hey, it’s over. The baby wasn’t really born; it was just a pageant, a crèche scene”? Not hardly. On the other hand, the star is gone. They have the problem of eluding Herod, and if you know anything about Herod, you know that is not going to be easy. And nobody is writing musicals or stories or plays about the return journey of the wise men. Back to the same old unglorious grind – only now you carry glory with you.

We spent most of December on the first part of Matthew’s story. While it is still fresh in our minds, let us at least glance at the second half. With the departure of the wise men, we get some very ugly things happening. Herod is in a rage because the wise men never report back to him. And we are told about the flight into Egypt; the killing of the babies; the careful return to Nazareth, after Herod’s death, because Herod’s son Archelaus has all of his father’s bad qualities and none of his genius. This is part of Christmas too, my dear friends. The world is a hard, cruel, mean place, sometimes even when it doesn’t at all intend to be. If it weren’t so, Messiah would never have come! People die or they are murdered, raped, ripped off, hurt, or maimed in endless ways, inside and out – on and all around Christmas. We all know that life is treacherous and uncertain; we just don’t like to think about it. We are afraid it will ruin Christmas. Only, it doesn’t ruin Christmas. It reminds us of why Christmas is necessary – of why He came in the first place. What ruins Christmas is keeping it out of real life, pretending it’s all fun and fantasy, and not letting it in to the full spectrum of our hearts and lives.

So we are not out of chapter two. We have hardly even taken a breath in the telling of the story. The horrid reaction of Herod is just as much a part of Christmas as the wondrous gifts of the magi. At least that is how Matthew tells it, and he is telling it just as true as he knows how.

So here we go, with one more look at Matthew’s story before we get to January. With the departure of the wise men, we are left to contemplate the strange comparison and contrast between two kings. One is a baby, proclaimed a universal and spiritual king by the wise men and their gifts. The other is a king in what we usually call “the real world.” What the story proclaims – screams really, at the top of its voice – is that everybody has to choose between these two kings. Of course, a lot of us are eager, even determined, to stay neutral, to stay aloof from this choice. But the story does not think that is possible. Neither does Jesus. *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with*

me – scatters.” (Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23) But let’s not jump the gun. Many people in our time know little about Jesus except for hearsay, and they know nothing at all about Herod. That makes the choice a bit nebulous.

Herod the Great was nearly seventy years old when Jesus was born. His thirty-four-year reign was about to end, with his death. He was a supreme politician, somehow managing to keep favor with Rome throughout the intrigue and the rise and fall of three Emperors, all of whom he knew personally. Herod was more popular in Rome than he was in Jerusalem, and his behavior matched the flavor and corruption of the courts of the Roman Empire of his time. He was ruthless (you remember the story of Ruth – the companion, the compassionate – well, Herod was ruthless), killing his father, sons, wives, friends, priests, members of the Sanhedrin, and anybody else who displeased him or whom he suspected or imagined might threaten his power or position.

On the other hand, Herod brought prosperity and order to Israel, where before there had been poverty and chaos. Like many heads of households, companies, and states we have known, Herod could take pride in the things he provided and the way he took responsibility for the benefit of those under his rule. He was an excellent and courageous warrior, as well as a good general. Palestine was not handed to him on a silver platter; he won it by taking strong initiative, by military might, and by shrewd negotiations. He was the greatest king since David, and his life was a cross between Robin Hood, King Arthur, and Bluebeard the Pirate.

Let me give you some background: Herod came from Idumea (Edom), southeast of the Dead Sea. You remember – that’s where Ishmael and Esau went. In the breakup of the Hasmonean Dynasty, Herod’s father managed to get Herod appointed as Governor of Galilee. Then the Parthians invaded during the chaos following the death of Julius Caesar. Herod – by cunning, daring, and the luck of the Scarlet Pimpernel – managed to elude the Parthian soldiers, escape into Egypt, elude Cleopatra’s soldiers, and take ship, in wintertime no less, to Rome. Once there, he managed to gain a hearing before Octavius and Anthony, themselves rivals for the throne of Rome, and win from them a promise of support once their own affairs were settled.

On the strength of that future promise, Herod returned to Palestine, rallied an army, and fought his way through the land, eventually capturing even Jerusalem. Then dancing between Anthony and Octavius

while they fought each other, Herod retained the support of Octavius Augustus Caesar as he came to total power, and Herod was a loyal supporter for the rest of his life.

Herod was arguably the greatest king since David. He ruled the same territory David had ruled, maybe even slightly more. He was responsible for the greatest building boom, and the greatest increase in trade and commerce in Israel since the days of King Solomon. He built Caesarea; he rebuilt Samaria (and called it “Sebaste,” the Greek translation of “Augustus,” in honor of the Emperor); he rebuilt the temple and the palace in Jerusalem; he built and repaired roads, aqueducts, theaters, stadiums – the list is endless.

Herod was Jewish in name only. He was a totally secular man, Hellenistic in his vision for Israel. He had no interest in anything beyond the material, physical plane – and the power he could gain. But he cared about his kingdom and the prosperity of his people. In the great famine of 25 B.C., Herod put his enormous energy toward saving his people, and he spent his own money as well as his nation’s resources to bring food from Egypt to keep his people fed.

Of course, there is more than one reason for feeding the hungry. Herod was shrewd enough and far-seeing enough to know that if the people were weak, the king was weak – a piece of logic that has escaped many leaders in all walks of life since the dawn of time. In any case, the other side of all this was that Herod revealed no shred of conscience – no accountability to a Higher Power. He was completely practical, efficient, and realistic. “Right” is whatever works – from your own perspective – in the here and now. Slaves died by the thousands on Herod’s building projects. He killed anybody and everybody who might have become a political threat. He makes Machievelli’s Prince seem like a saint.

His favorite wife was Mariamne (I). But she was the heiress of the former Hasmonean dynasty and, as such, she and her offspring were potential contenders for Herod’s throne. In case anyone was planning a coup, Herod ended up killing Mariamne (29 B.C.), whom he mourned for the rest of his life. He also killed her grandfather, her brother (Aristobulus), and his two sons by her (Alexander and Aristobulus, 7 B.C.). He ordered the execution of a third son (Antipater, named after Herod’s father) just five days before his own death. (Kill a son to rule for five more days? That’s real paranoia!) Herod would have loved our slogans: “Go for the gusto.” “Be all you can be.” “God helps those who help themselves.” He had no esteem for God, but he had a lot of self-esteem.

Herod was king of the Jews, but in no way was he a Jewish king. Jewish kings knew that God was the only true King.

My father was a probation officer for the County of Los Angeles until he could no longer stand it. As such, he was in and around the courts, and in fact his offices were in the same building with the courts. One day he came home with a story about a long and tedious trial in which a man had been accused of a sordid and cruel crime. When the jury was ready with its verdict, the foreman stood and delivered a verdict of not guilty. The foreman went on to explain that they had found the man innocent because it had been proved to the jury's satisfaction that the man had not been present at the scene of the crime, and so he could not have done it. "But," continued the foreman, "after what we have learned, during the course of this trial, about this man and his character, this jury would like to state publicly that we are convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that had this man been there, he would have done it."

Somehow, that gets me where it hurts. How many times have I been saved simply by lack of temptation or lack of opportunity? Is it that I have real character, or have I just been elsewhere? How can we live so that even God will know that if he puts us there, we will not do it? Or, even more importantly, that if he puts us there, we will do right, we will do justly, we will demonstrate the love of Him who sent us?

There is no record of Herod having killed the babies of Bethlehem. Strange, since Josephus loved to list Herod's crimes, yet somehow he missed this one. Strange that such a calamity would not have echoed throughout the records of the time. But the whole world knew that this was very like Herod – had he been there, he would have done it.

Well, Matthew, I believe, tells this Christmas story to highlight two kings: one a helpless child, and one a cruel tyrant. Matthew's world – Matthew's readers – know both what kind of King the baby Jesus had turned into and what sort of king Herod had been. And Matthew's story, at the end and at its apex, says: "Choose! Choose which kind of king you will serve. Choose your king ... because you become like that which you serve."

On the one hand, we have Herod the Great: A cruel and ruthless monarch – a man of the world, and worldly in every respect. All of his abilities and gifts, his incredible health and energy, and his brilliance had been devoted to gaining power in this world – to gaining, keeping, and expanding his kingdom here. And he did it, and did it incredibly

well. He had what he wanted, took what he wanted, lived in great luxury. (Some of you have vacation spots. Have you *seen* Masada? Herod had ten of them. He was buried in one of them, Herodium, just a few miles southeast of Bethlehem.) Herod had it all and he kept it all for thirty-four years, and nobody even came close to taking it away from him. They did not live long enough.

On the other hand, we have a helpless child, an angel, some wise men bearing gifts, a faithful peasant couple fleeing into Egypt. And *this* King would not kill you. Oh, He could. He had the power. But He would not. He would die for you first.

Matthew is asking: Whom will you choose? Whom will you bet your life on?

Of course, Matthew's readers already know that Herod Antipas (one of Herod's sons) killed John the Baptist and turned Jesus back over to Pilate, and that Jesus had indeed been crucified – all of it thirty-five to forty years before Matthew's story was written. But Matthew is still asking: Whom will you choose? The worldly king, or the heavenly child? The shrewd political realist, or the spiritual idealist?

But wait a minute. Which is the truly practical man? Do we really envy Herod? He had all the wine, women, song, and luxury that power and money could buy, but do we envy him? Much of our world still emulates Herod, as if we are hypnotized against seeing the end of his story – against seeing where it leads if we live like Herod lived.

Herod was working for a thirty-four-year reign. Jesus was – and is – building for eternity. If you believe in eternity, Herod is not very practical. If you believe in God, Herod is a total idiot. How would you have liked to have been Herod when he met God? Oh, I'm not talking about wrath; that would be easy, and just. What about looking into the face of God and seeing the tears and sorrow for all that you had done, and for what you had made with the life that he gave you?

The difference between Herod and Jesus is the difference between living for what you can acquire, or living for what you can become. And Matthew says, "You have a choice. Choose your king." That, also, is the story of Christmas.