

GIFTS FOR A KING(DOM): 1. GOLD

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Matthew 2:1-12

When we think of a church, we normally think of a plot of land with a building on it. Usually this building has a steeple, but sometimes it has a tower. But frequently, churches are more than just a plot of land and a building. Sometimes, churches own other types of properties. For example, it is not unusual for a church to own a cemetery. Many churches have schools on their property. Churches often own residential properties and office buildings. One church I served owned an apartment building that housed a radio station. There's a Presbyterian church in Nashville that owns a horse stable. Out in Arizona, the Vatican owns an observatory.

When I am with my colleagues and the conversation rolls around to what our particular churches might own, I can usually stop the discussion when I mention that First Presbyterian Church in Lebanon owns a dry cleaners. Yes. I bet there are some of you here who are not aware of this fact. Your church owns a dry cleaning establishment... Well, sort of.

In 1971, church member R.L. Trigg willed a piece of property at 319 East Main Street to the church. The property is about half a mile from here on the other side of the square. The property was not given to our church, but instead it was bequeathed to the Mission Board of the Presbyterian denomination. FPC was instructed to collect rent on the property and send that money to the Mission Board for them to use as they saw fit. We were to keep one month's rent each year to cover administrative costs.

The property at 319 East Main Street has always been the site of a dry cleaners. At some point, that business became the Sparkle Laundry.

Unfortunately, over the years, we, as a church, did not oversee this property as well as we might have. We're a church, not a property management company. The rent that we charged the laundry was only \$300 a month and to my knowledge, that amount never changed. The agreement was that the business would handle all maintenance and upkeep and expenses on the property and in return pay \$300 a month.

This past fall, the owner of Sparkle Laundry decided to retire, and he closed the business. And now, the church needs to decide what to do with this empty property.

We have two options. One, is to find a new tenant and continue to rent the location. Unfortunately, the building has not been maintained as well as we would have liked and it now requires significant roof repairs that would cost thousands of dollars. Also, because the site has housed a dry cleaners for over 50 years, there might be some environmental concerns as well. We simply don't know.

The other option (and what the session has decided to do) is simply to sell the property. However, since we don't own the property, there will be some legal maneuvering required. We will have to go to court as some point. Hopefully, we can find a buyer who will put the property to good use.

I will come back and talk more about the property in a moment. But for now, I want to talk about Epiphany.

Today, on the church calendar, is Epiphany Sunday. The actual day of Epiphany is always January the 6th. January 6 is the twelfth day after Christmas—just like the song.

The word *epiphany* comes from the Greek and it means “manifestation.” The gospel story most closely associated with the day of Epiphany is the story of the wise man—strangers from the east who came looking for the one born king of the Jews. The wise men were the first non-Jews to adore this new king. In other words, the Messiah was made manifest to them.

First of all, despite what the hymn says, the wise men weren't kings. They were magi. As best we can tell, they would likely have been Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Scripture does not tell us that there were three of them. Scripture does list three gifts, not three magi, and we make the assumption. And they did not arrive on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. They were not present at the birth of Jesus but arrived some time later—possibly as much as three years later. They did not come to the stable but to a house in Bethlehem where the holy family resided. The term “wise men” is a holdover from the old King James Bible. The Greek word used by Matthew is μάγοι.

As Matthew tells us, when Jesus was born to Mary the ruler of Judea was King Herod. This was Herod the Great. He was not the legitimate king of Judea but instead was a Roman appointee. It is not even certain that he was actually Jewish.

During Herod's rule, these magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem and they start asking around for the king. Specifically, they are looking for *the child who has been born king of the Jews*. They explained to people that they had *observed his star at its rising* and they had come to pay him homage.

Their inquiries got the attention of King Herod and it frightens him. After all, he was the king of the Jews put in place by the Romans, and he certainly didn't want a legitimate king to rise and challenge him. And so, King Herod called

together the religious brain trust—the chief priests and scribes—and he asked them where a Messiah would be born. Just asking this question showed how little Herod knew about Judaism. Any self-respecting Jew would be familiar with the prophesy of Micah. As Matthew quotes the prophesy: *Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.*

With the information that the Messiah or king would be born in Bethlehem, Herod quietly calls in the magi and learns the timing of the birth of this so-called king they are chasing. And he directs the magi to Bethlehem to find the king. Herod requests that when they find the child that they let him know so that he might go and pay homage as well.

So the magi travel the short distance to Bethlehem. The star they had been following stopped over a house and they knock on the door. Inside, they find the child and its mother and they *knelt down and paid him homage*. From their treasure chests they extract extravagant gifts and offer them to the child. Then, because they are *warned in a dream not to return to Herod*, they take a different route home.

This sermon today is the first of three that I am calling *Gifts for a King(dom)*. And we're going to look at the story of the magi and the gifts they brought to the king. Today, I want to look at the first gift, gold, and then next Sunday and the Sunday after we will look at frankincense and myrrh.

So, what is gold? Gold is a rare metal with amazing properties to which humans have historically placed great value. Gold is malleable and easy to shape into different forms. It can be hammered out into extremely thin sheets which artists use to gild objects. We prize gold because it is shiny and pretty. Today, 78% of the yearly gold supply is fashioned into jewelry.

The word gold most likely has its origins in the Indo-European word GHEL, which means yellow. The chemical symbol for gold is AU from the Latin word aurum, which means gold. It literally means glowing dawn. And, yes, a pretty piece of gold is the color of a glowing dawn doesn't it.

Gold is highly reflective of heat and light. Have you ever wondered why the face masks of astronauts appear to be gold colored? It is because their visors are coated with an extraordinarily thin layer of gold—a layer so thin that it is partially transparent. The gold reflects glare and heat but allows the astronauts to still see through it.

As an FYI, in case you were curious, the current market value of gold is \$1870.50 per ounce. The magis' gift of gold was indeed a gift fit for a king. It certainly wasn't the normal present that you would take to a baby shower.

And that raises the question that is at the heart of this series: What gifts do we bring to our Christ that are fit for a king? What gifts do we freely bring to our Lord? And if you notice, I added “dom” to king to make it kingdom. So, the second question is what can we bring that not only honors our king, but also works to usher in God's kingdom?

One gift that we can bring to God is the same one brought by the magi, gold. More specifically we would bring money. We can give our money first as a tribute to our Lord. We can also give it to further the mission of the church to promote the Kingdom in our world. Our money represents us. It can go where we can't. For example, in March, two of our members are going on a medical mission trip to Guatemala. We can't all go along but we can certainly send our money with these missionaries to do God's work. We will be asking you for your donations in the near future.

Ideally all the money you give to the church should go out to do the work of God. But the reality is that your church requires a portion of your gift to maintain the institution—to pay utilities so that we have heat and air, to maintain the building, to pay salaries, and more. Normal expenses.

The session has requested that I spend more time this year informing you about our financial situation. You'll notice that there is a weekly financial update in the back of the bulletin. Also, in the weekly e-mail, there's a link to the notes from each session meeting which provides more financial information from the treasurer. Of course, the church office will share with you anything you want to know about our finances other than the confidential giving records of individuals. But other than that, we strive to be 100% transparent.

Unfortunately, the news that I bring is that our expenses generally exceed our income. The church does have money in reserves which we use to cover the budgetary shortfall, but that reserve fund is not as large as it used to be. The church is not in any imminent danger of financial failure, but we are looking into the future and planning accordingly. But we are not alone. Almost every church finds itself in a similar situation. COVID has been tough on everyone.

But back to the wise men, gold was an excellent gift. Tradition tells us that after the wise men departed for home, and the Mary and Joseph and the child were forced to flee to Egypt, and the tradition tells us that the gold sustained them.

Our money is a powerful way to give of ourselves to God for the ushering in of God's kingdom. Our money can be used to demonstrate the kingdom to the world. And it does this when we engage in helping ministries throughout our community and throughout our world. Your time, your effort, your talents, but also your money are needed to do these things so that we might help the light of Christ shine a little brighter.

Finally, I want to get back to the Sparkle Laundry, because it was truly an amazing gift. Although I don't think that it paid off as the giver envisioned because what has happened is that for the past fifty years we have simply been holding on to that property. But in that time, property values in Lebanon have increased significantly and so now it possibly worth far more than it was fifty years ago. And when we sell this property, we will be able to send far more money up to the denomination and they will be able to do far more at this time when so many churches and institutions and helping agencies are financially strapped. So maybe it is a blessing that we haven't done a whole lot with it. In the end, I like to think that Mr. Trigg was giving gold—gold that would continue the work of the church long after he was gone.

So, I want to end by pointing out that that despite the words of the old proverb, "All that sparkles..."

Amen.