

Christmas 2, Year B, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
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We three kings of Orient are  
Bearing gifts we traverse afar  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain  
Following yonder star  
O Star of wonder, star of night  
Star with royal beauty bright  
Westward leading, still proceeding  
Guide us to thy Perfect Light

So began our service today,  
the traditional carol  
for the Feast of the Epiphany, the Feast for the second  
half of the Christmas story.

The first half, of course, we all know,  
told as it is  
in the gospel according to St Luke,  
Mary and Joseph  
traveling to Bethlehem  
to be registered,  
Mary giving birth  
and placing her newborn baby in a manger  
because there was no room for them at the inn;  
the birth announced by angels to shepherds  
out in the fields with their sheep,  
and the shepherds rushing to see the baby boy.

And now we come to the second half,  
told in the gospel according to St Matthew.  
And it's not quite the scene  
that we sometimes imagine,  
the one immortalized in our creches,  
shepherds on one side,  
three kings on the other,  
angel and star overhead,  
all gazing fondly  
on the holy family.

Because to begin with,

it was likely some months later, maybe even a year or more,  
that the magi  
finally showed up.  
they had a long journey  
from the time they first saw the star  
and tried to work out  
what it meant  
to the time they actually arrived in Bethlehem.  
And by then  
Mary and Joseph and the baby  
were living in a house,  
the baby perhaps even beginning to walk.  
And we're not even sure who they were,  
let alone how many of them.  
The bible tells us they were magi,  
but that term  
is a little unclear.  
Perhaps they were astrologers,  
people who studied the sky,  
looking at the stars to predict famine, war, and peace.  
Perhaps they were Zoroastrian priests  
from Persia.  
Perhaps they were from Babylon  
where the Jews had been exiled  
hundreds of years before  
and where traces of Jewish faith  
had become intermingled  
with local religions.  
But they probably weren't kings -  
there's nothing in the gospels to suggest that -  
rather  
they were thoughtful  
seekers,  
looking  
for God  
and willing to offer  
whatever they had of value  
to this child  
to whom their sources of wisdom  
had led them.

And the gifts, three of them -  
and again, the carol is slightly confused,

because while we know there were three gifts,  
 we have no idea how many people  
 brought those gifts -  
 but the gifts,  
 they were standard gifts in the ancient world  
 given to honor a king or deity,  
 gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil.

But the gifts have even greater significance -  
 and here the carol has got it right -  
 the gifts telling us  
 who this baby boy  
 would be.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain  
 Gold I bring to crown Him again  
 King forever, ceasing never  
 Over us all to reign

Gold has always been  
 not just a symbol of wealth  
 but one of status.  
 We tend to associate it with crowns,  
 but in the ancient world,  
 it was more important  
 as a sign of prestige,  
 gold goblets,  
 jewelry,  
 and decoration  
 showing the importance  
 and power of the king.  
 And there in Jerusalem  
 in the temple itself  
 gold was used,  
 making beautiful  
 the place where God was known to dwell,  
 God the king of kings  
 and Lord of Lords.

The magi  
 came looking for a king,  
 and when they found him  
 they gave him a king's gift

and a king's honor.

That's what it looks like  
in hindsight,  
and perhaps Mary and Joseph  
put the gift away  
for the baby,  
holding it  
till he reached an age  
where he could understand  
its significance.

Or perhaps the value of the gold  
was much more practical.  
Raising a child doesn't come cheap, even back then,  
and this gift must have seemed  
an unimaginable blessing.

And, of course,  
you know what happens after  
the visit of the magi.  
King Herod gets scared  
and sends out an order  
to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem  
just in case one of them  
might threaten  
his throne.

And Joseph  
has a dream,  
and an angel  
tells him to take Mary and the baby  
and escape to Egypt,  
and maybe  
the gold  
made that possible,  
enough to pay passage  
for the family  
and to support them  
while they were there.

And then there is the frankincense.

Frankincense to offer have I  
Incense owns a Deity nigh  
Prayer and praising, all men raising  
Worship Him, God most high

Frankincense,  
a sweet perfume,  
covering the smells  
of everyday life.  
It scented the royal residence  
and the royal person,  
distinctive  
and powerful.  
And it was the incense  
of prayer,  
used in religious ceremonies  
across the Middle East.  
It was one of the consecrated incenses used in the temple in Jerusalem,  
a symbol of God's name,  
its smoke  
carrying the prayers of the faithful  
to heaven.

The magi  
came looking for a king,  
and when they found him  
they gave him a king's gift  
and a king's honor.

Frankincense  
given to a baby,  
a sign  
that there  
God was present,  
holiness captured  
in human form.

And perhaps Mary and Joseph  
put the gift away  
for the baby,  
holding it  
till he reached an age  
where he could understand

its significance.

Or perhaps Mary received it  
and put it in her bag of herbal remedies,  
something to help with arthritis, digestion,  
and healthy skin.

And perhaps a foretaste  
of Jesus' other role,  
not just as a conduit to God,  
but as a healer.

And finally myrrh.

Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume  
Breathes a life of gathering gloom  
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying  
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb

Myrrh,  
another of the traditional temple incenses,  
used for anointing priests  
and anointing the altar.

Valuable,  
and precious.

And one of the traditional spices  
of burial.

A strange gift  
for a baby,  
at the very beginning  
of life,  
looking to the other end of life.

The magi  
came looking for a king,  
and when they found him  
they gave him a king's gift  
and a king's honor.

That's true of the other gifts.

But this one, this one is different.

Because while it was traditionally a king's gift,  
it is also a gift for a priest,  
and a gift  
for death.

This above all the gifts

speaks of who this baby was.

King, priest, maybe even God.  
And one  
who was born  
to die.

A death that we know  
all too well,  
betrayed with a kiss,  
condemned to die,  
hanging on a cross  
and buried  
in a borrowed tomb.

And if you remember  
there wasn't even time  
to anoint his body properly  
with the spices;  
it was the first Easter morning  
when the women took their spices  
to finish the job of burial  
and found instead of a stone cold body  
Jesus himself, alive.

And perhaps Mary and Joseph  
put the gift away for the baby,  
holding it  
till he reached an age  
where he could understand  
its significance.

Or perhaps Mary received it  
and put it alongside the frankincense in her bag of herbal remedies,  
something to help with bruising, ailments of the mouth, even cancer.  
Another foretaste  
of Jesus  
the healer.

We three kings, the song goes,  
bearing gifts.  
Seekers, looking for a king, looking, perhaps  
for more than a king.

Someone  
who would be king,  
priest,  
prophet,  
healer,  
maybe even  
God.  
And bringing him  
whatever gifts they thought  
might be appropriate,  
gifts that perhaps seemed  
of no earthly use  
but spoke  
of the heavenly,  
gifts for God, used by God.

A couple of days ago  
I watched the Christmas special  
of the British show "Call the midwife."  
In it, one of the nurses, Cynthia,  
struggles with a sense of calling  
to be a nun.  
She is seeking, yearning, for God.  
But she feels like  
she has nothing  
to offer.  
And the wise senior nun counsels her,  
that the gifts themselves  
are not so important  
as the offering  
of herself,  
and with her self, her heart  
will come her gifts.  
And God will use them.

We are seekers, seekers after God.  
And like the magi,  
we are invited to offer to Christ  
our gifts,  
gold, frankincense, myrrh,  
or things much more prosaic,  
but at the very heart of them  
to offer Christ

our hearts.  
And trust  
that in offering  
God will use us,  
and lead us to  
his very own self.

O Star of wonder, star of night  
Star with royal beauty bright  
Westward leading, still proceeding  
Guide us to Thy perfect light