

Sermon Title: Making Room

December 31, 2006

Text: Psalm 148, Colossians 3:12-17  
Matthew 2:1-12

Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
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It is an odd assortment of gifts to be brought to the birth of a child, but I'm not sure what you would expect from three exotic visitors, winding their way through Bethlehem's narrow streets until they found the house where Mary and Joseph were living with their newborn son. I'm not entirely sure what a more appropriate gift would have been for a child born to such a couple at such a time, but to those who read Matthew's telling of Jesus' birth the overtones of these gifts would have been clear, and perplexing.

Gold is straightforward enough—a metal that is every bit as precious today as it was then. All season long I've been reminded in television ads that if I want to win my true love's heart, all I have to do is buy her *gold*—or a Cadillac. It's value would have been considerable, but given the circumstances of the mom and dad, used to dealing in talents and shekels, and mites, it would have led to some head scratching. How exactly do you change pieces of gold into the currency you might need to buy flour and olive oil and the sorts of things you might need to assure this child's survival? Gold was the currency of kings and potentates, useful as it is to this day because it's a kind of money that speaks wherever you might be—a sort of base metal American Express Card. But it was not the sort of thing that an average carpenter and his young wife would have had or known how to use. A nice thought, but what exactly Mary and Joseph would do with it is an interesting question.

Likewise frankincense would have been far more at home in the magi's home courts than in the house in which Jesus was born. It would not have been completely foreign to Mary and Joseph, assuming they'd spent any time in the temple. It was one of the parts of the elixir that the priests would add to the offerings brought by the people to be burned upon the holy altar. Mixed with the flour, or the wheat, or the pigeons or doves that were required of the worshipper, Frankincense was that little something extra that the priest would add to make the gift acceptable to God. It's akin to buying a newborn a homebound communion kit: it might give you a hint as to just what you hope this child will grow up to be, but it's not exactly practical.

But both pale in comparison to myrrh. Mary and Joseph would have been familiar with this one, but they would have recoiled at its scent, for myrrh had but one context in that ancient world: to mask the smell and pain of death. It was a substance not unlike morphine in its effect that could ease death's pains, and then was used for its pungent odor to prepare a body for burial. I imagine anyone from that time who caught even a whiff of the substance would have been transported to the rows of crosses that Herod regularly employed in order to punish those who were guilty of undermining the peace of the realm.

As exotic as these visitors from the East might have seemed when they approached the house, there must have been a shutter when they left, leaving three boxes of the most unconventional of gifts, mostly lost upon us for whom these figures and their gifts are but the last three ornaments to be hung from the tree before everything is wrapped up and put away until next year.

But remember, if you can, on this New Year's Eve, that Matthew's story was not told directly for us. It's purpose was to tell those who had never heard of Jesus the story of his life, and if the truth be told, more importantly, the story of his death as a result of his life. Though we've domesticated it in such that children can play all the roles, make no mistake that Matthew's telling was *intended* to make the listener squirm. If you've a doubt, read on to the next six verses in Matthew's telling—a scene that I dare say has never been portrayed by the children of the church school. Act One Scene One in the Gospel of Matthew ends with no one humming a happy tune, but with Jeremiah's terrifying vision of Rachel, bereft of her children, refusing to be consoled “because they are no more.”

For those more familiar with the story—we who have been rehearsing it for years, and know the characters and their movements by heart—I suppose the strangeness of opening scene from Matthew is intended mostly to bring us up short. It's there to push us to consider that all may not be as it seems; that this child is not quite as innocent as he might appear, and more than anything else, that he just might not fit into the little place we've carved out for him in this world.

If I'm not being too flip, it's the same sort of thing that I'm guessing countless households are just beginning to come to grips with, in which the eye-popping gift under the tree this year was a little ball of golden fur that rolled out of a box and started licking the face of a squealing child. They're just now noticing that the paws on that little puffball are the size of a child's baseball glove, and the gangly legs attached to them are twice the size they were on Christmas morning. The little box in the corner of the kitchen is not going to do, and dad's beginning to think that the only viable option is either to park the car in the driveway or build an addition. That cute little puppy is going to be a full-grown Labrador, and there's just no way to fit him back into the box.

So, shrug the magi as they turn the corner and head back to their divining, this cute little babe of Bethlehem is really the stuff of kings, born of a royal priesthood. But as they scanned the horizon of his life, it was burial spices that would serve him best. If you want to receive the one who is to be born, you can almost hear them whisper, you had best make room for more than you ever bargained for.

How do you get yourself ready, not for the birth of this child, but to bring *this* child home? How do we truly make Jesus a part of our lives, and not just the prop to justify the way we've already chosen for ourselves? Though not in so many words, that was precisely the question Paul struggled with in almost all of the letters he wrote to the young churches who *had* heard, and received the Good News in Matthew, or Mark, or Luke's telling. And as I read our lectionary reading for this morning, I was truly struck by something that should have been obvious to me, but frankly (and this might be as much confession as anything else) was not.

You want to live as God's Chosen, he asks? Paul does not then scan the world around these new believers to see the ways in which everything else will have to be changed. He didn't sneer at the Roman soldier at the corner and confront his unjust use of power. He didn't make his way into any of the temples that dotted the course of his journeys, tearing down pagan altars and replacing them with pictures of Jesus, hands clasped in pious prayer. Instead, he urges the young church to take a good long look at themselves. The transformation necessary if the light of

Christ is to shine through you in this world starts not out there, in the evil world that awaits your sword of faith. The transformation that is required is deep in the heart of you.

“Clothe yourselves,” he says, and I love that image. Because I’m pretty sure that none of you would have given a second’s consideration this morning to leaving your house without putting *something* on. But I wonder how often we rush out of the house without a second thought as to whether our faith is guiding us. What we need for this child’s life to take root in our own is to make it our constant companion, and not something to which we turn when we think we might need it. It is that which will protect us from the harshest of elements, but only if we are mindful. None of you are wearing t-shirts and cut offs today, because it would not be suited to this day, and if you came in the middle of July bundled in overcoats and mittens we’d worry about you. Because clothing does, indeed, need to be considered in relation to the world you are entering. It is something you do, indeed, think of just about first thing every morning. What should I wear today? “Clothe yourself” Paul says, and I nod.

“Clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Listen to that list again: compassion...kindness...humility...meekness...patience. I don’t know what your last month has been like, preparing for this child to be born, but if yours has been like mine, these are not the words that might best describe what you’ve been about. My jacket’s a little snug in the patience, and pretty loose in compassion. The meekness could be lengthened a good inch, and I’m not sure I even thought about how it might go with humility. How about you?

How about *us*? The dressing of these past weeks has been nothing short of glorious. You just have to open your eyes to see the beauty set before us. The choir has sung its heart out, and our children have added that joyous touch only they can give. But now we are moving into a new year. What lies beneath? In a world of appearances, Paul urges us to think deeper.

Do we *love* one another? We’re capable of it, I know. I’ve seen it, and felt it deeply in the past months as you’ve cared for me and for my family. But I know as well that its easy in the crush of our lives to rush out of the house in the morning and forget to wear my love—to lose track of each other, to feel left out, left behind, uncared for, unloved.

- Does the peace of Christ rule in our hearts? Or are we just a little worried about what lies ahead, uncertain that we’re really on track as it seems the world zooms on?
- Are we *thankful* for what we’ve got, or do we find ourselves just a tad bit envious, maybe even defensive, as we look at our neighbors, or our sister and brother congregations, wondering what they’ve got that we don’t?

If you truly want to make room for the Christ who is born, it’s those sorts of things that will need the most attention. It’s not the bells and whistles, the window dressings and bright packages, but those core matters of our souls—how we are with ourselves, and with each other. Making room for the Christ who is born means allowing the Word of Christ to “dwell in us richly”, not twisting and shaping it to fit our whims and desires, but allowing our souls, and our lives together, to be shaped and molded by its gentle pushes and pulls. The room to be made will

come from our teaching each other, and opening our lives to each other, joining our voices in worship, and lifting our praise to God, and doing do as authentically, and fully, as we can.

You may know that I'm not a big fan of New Year's resolutions, but I *do* believe in New Year's *reflection*, taking stock of where I am, and where the winds of the Spirit might be blowing us; what needs to be preserved, and what needs to be set aside, if *next* year is to look a little more like the life God intends for me than *last* year.

The magi are all but gone, only their troubling gifts left open before us, and they leave us with a challenge: was this past month only about a God who is more like Santa Claus, rewarding those who are nice, punishing those who are naughty, showing up with a twitch of his nose and then just as quickly disappearing up the chimney? Or are we ready to allow this child to grow into the gifts that were left for him? Can we shape our lives, with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience such that the true wonder of this birth might take root in our lives—that the Word of God might dwell richly in *us*—full of grace and truth, as John put it, giving us the power to become children of this God who stoops into our world, that we might rise up to heaven?

Let us pray.