

January 8 Epiphany

Gratitude requires a Response

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany is the celebration of God's inclusive love for the entire world. It begins with the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem to see the child. Up until this point in the faith history of the Jew's God's love was seen as exclusive. You are my chosen people. I will be your God. You shall be my people. These are the words and phrases that are often heard in the Old Testament. Jesus, as a grown man, would instead talk about how God so loved the world, not just the Jews. In his words and actions Jesus was always reaching out to those the faithful considered outside of God's grace. He cared about women, even "fallen women", and Samaritans and tax collectors. Jesus wanted us to hear that God's love was inclusive. The wise men are the first indication of this new and radical doctrine of love. We don't really know much about them but this we can say with certainty, they were not Jewish. They symbolize how the actions of God in Christ are for all. The wise men saw the signs in the heavens, a sign there for all to see, but only they were open to its possibility. In their coming and worshipping at the feet of Jesus they showed that God's love welcomes everyone in.

Part of the wise men's response to being a part of the great drama of God sending the messiah was to give gifts. In one way what they did is a natural enough occurrence. At births, on birthdays, and at major events in life we give gifts. On a deeper level their giving shows that they were aware of how great and wonderful was this birth and they felt privileged to be included in the drama.

Think about some of the deeper reasons we give gifts. Of course we give gifts because we love the individual. They are dear to us and birthdays and Christmas are just excuses we use to express our feelings. But this was not the reason the wise men gave gifts. They did not know Jesus. Also, we at times give because of the joy that is happening in another's life which we wish to celebrate. Weddings are one such occasion. You may not know the couple, they are the

sons or daughters of a friend but it is such a joyous time in your friend's life that you give a gift. There might have been something of joy in the reason for the gifting by the wise men. They had probably heard of the prophecies. They had definitely seen by the signs in the heavens that God was at work and so they gave in joy for what God was doing. Probably the rarest reason for giving and the reason behind the gifting by the wise men, at least as far as I am concerned, is because you are in awe of what God has done in your life.

I think about the story I read recently about a woman who is a cancer survivor. Every year, on the anniversary of the report that she was now in remission, she does something for some other individual going through cancer treatment. Among the things she has done has been to take them out for a fancy dinner, buy them new clothes, pay for a family member's plane ticket so they can visit the one who is undergoing treatment. She does this because she is so in awe of the fact that she is no longer sick and needs to express that feeling of joy in some tangible way.

Today I would like you to think about what God does for you. In particular how God in Christ gives meaning and joy to your life. One of the things to be grateful for is how God, through the ministries of this church, enriches our lives. Isn't it wonderful to know that each week begins with time with friends? There is the support we receive when we or a loved one is sick or dying. Those who have gone through these dark times often share how they don't think they could have gotten through that time without the church. There is the satisfaction we feel in knowing that we are participating in ministries that make life changing differences in people's lives. You can probably name many more reasons to give thanks for this church. Doesn't it leave you in awe when you consider how much this church means to you and how it supports and nourishes your faith and lifts you up during the difficult times of life?

I know I always am in awe of the work of the churches I have served and their caring and compassion. We do some things wonderfully well. The wise men felt awe at being one of the first to know. Not even Herod knew of the birth. In this awe they did something very natural they gave gifts.

Giftng or giving is a natural response to feeling grateful. It is done from the heart, not counting the cost. I feel your faith needs opportunities to be able to give whether that is of your time or your money. When we are in awe of God's mighty acts in our lives then worship and gratitude are our natural response. The wise men worshiped and gave gifts.

I want to share one last story celebrating what giftng does for us as we look at better ways to live our lives this coming year. She was on a very tight budget. She saved her change from her purchases and when she got to a dollar she converted it to a one dollar bill. She then looked for ways to give that dollar away. I knew about her actions because she had told me about it one day. Mostly her giving was anonymous. She would give to a fund drive for the youth, or a mission project or sometimes would just think about a family in need in the church and want to help out, hence my knowing of her plan. You should have seen her face when she came in to give me her thank dollars. That's what she called them. She was so glad for all of God's care for her during her life that she just needed to pass on some help to others. She relied truly on the scriptures where it said that even a widow's two pennies were noticed and appreciated by God. It was not a burden, this giving, it was a joy. She was filled with the awe and love of God and shared it in small ways with others.

This year I hope you, like the wise men seek for the star of God's guidance. Look around and see God in many places and individuals this year. Be filled with awe at what God is doing in your lives and the lives of others and out of the gratitude find ways to respond. When you live this way you will know more fully the love of God.