

Sermon – Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1:12

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Grace Lutheran Church

Epiphany – Year C

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“What Do You Get for the God Who Has Everything?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I was as surprised as anyone to wake up twelve days ago to the sound of my children quoting the prophet Isaiah: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Of course, their translation from the original Hebrew was a little looser, a bit more colloquial: “Get up! Get up! Dad, *wake* up! It’s morning, it’s Christmas, and it’s time to open presents!” I suppose it’s possible that they didn’t have Isaiah’s prophetic words in mind as they clamored into our bed and over our bodies on Christmas morning, but I’m the father of PKs – pastor’s kids – and it’s my prerogative to assume that they have the words of scripture at their fingertips, ready to be deployed in any circumstance. Whatever the inspiration of their words, the message was both clear and effective. Their mother and I awoke from slumber, arose from our bed, and – once fortified with coffee – allowed the opening of gifts to commence. The effect was that there was an effect, for the giving and receiving of gifts changes things, for both the one who gives and the one who receives. The net effect of opening Christmas gifts in the Lyle household was that we all spent the rest of the day knee-deep in LEGOs, creating bricked scenes from the grounds of Hogwarts to the sands of the desert planet, Tatooine. The overall effect was quite pleasant, especially for me, as I made sure to give my children gifts with which I – ahem, I mean, they – would enjoy playing.

2. Gifts change things; they elicit a response. Gifts cause an effect. On this Epiphany, the gifts of the magi seem a likely place to start. We'll get there eventually. But the gifts of gold frankincense, and myrrh are not the main gifts in the story. They are effects and signifiers of the gift first given. For the gift that had been foretold long ago by Isaiah, the light of the Lord's glory, had finally in the fullness of time burst forth upon the horizons of this world. A king had been born, one like no other, come to shepherd the people of Israel and gather in the Gentiles. Led by an evening star, the magi come from the East to find and worship the Morning Star, fair and bright. Finding Jesus with Mary, his mother, they who had arisen to seek him now fall down to pay him homage. The lives of the magi are changed, and with them the future of the Gentiles, of you and of me – long lost from God through ignorance and disobedience, but now shown a light that they, we, could no longer resist.

3. But the magi, these wise men, are not the only ones in the story who are changed. Jesus' birth has effect upon others, too, upon men less wise but more powerful. Chief among these is, of course, Herod the Great, client king and petty despot. The gift of Jesus creates fear in Herod, and all Jerusalem with him. Why? Because those who rule by fear will always be afraid of love; those who oppress others will always be challenged by freedom and forgiveness. In short, Jesus' rule of grace means the end of Herod's reign of terror. This, too, will lead to other effects. From the slaughter of innocent babies around Bethlehem to the flight of Joseph and Mary, now refugees crossing the border into Egypt to fulfill the prophecy and find a better life for their child. In Herod, we see our worst selves that sinfully insist upon charting our own course and putting ourselves first; and we see the worst of this world, violence unleashed to create power and support greed, never mind the oppression or injustice created along the way, the lives that are ruined.

4. But the gift that drew the wise men to Bethlehem will not be denied; the light shining forth now pierces the darkness and it will not be overcome. The work wrought in Christ Jesus is nothing less than the eternal purpose that God has now carried out, and it is a purpose of grace. It is through grace that Christ will overwhelm the evil of this world; it is through grace that Christ will enter our dead lives and enliven them with light. It is here that we see the meaning of the gifts brought by the magi. Gold, as a gift fit for a king. Frankincense, for prayers wafting toward the divine. And myrrh, used to prepare bodies at the time of burial, to foreshadow the death that Jesus was born to die. Gifts that point to the divine king who had become human to die for us. The gifts of the magi are not so much gifts as they are signifiers of the gift first given, Jesus Christ. But what are we to give to Jesus, who has become human to return us to God; what gift for the One who will die that we would live? A better question with which to start might be: What effect has Jesus had on you, and on me?

5. Perhaps you've heard of James Harrison, an Australian known as "the Man with the Golden Arm." At the age of fourteen, James had lifesaving chest surgery, during which he received nearly 3.5 gallons of blood, which is more than a human body holds at any given moment. 3.5 gallons of blood, gifted to him by people he likely never met. The gift both saved and changed his life. The effect was that he pledged to become a blood donor. As soon as he turned 18, he began to make donations. He retired last year at the age of 81, which is the oldest age at which one can donate blood in Australia. Between the ages of 18 to 81, Mr. Harrison gifted 1,173 donations, beginning with blood and switching later to blood plasma. Why so much? Early on, his blood was found to contain specific antibodies that could be used to combat Rhesus disease, which causes a pregnant mother's blood to attack her unborn baby's blood cells, with disastrous effects. His very rare blood could be used to create medicine to counteract the disease and save the baby's life. Every batch of this medication, Anti-D, that has ever been made in Australia has

come from Mr. Harrison's blood. It is estimated that his blood donations have saved the lives of 2.4 million babies, including the life of his grandchild!

Doctors aren't sure why he has this rare blood type, but believe it resulted from the transfusions he received during that surgery at the age of 14. The gift of blood not only saved his life; it turned his blood into a gift that literally saved the lives of millions. Gifts received cause effects.

6. So what are we to give to Jesus on this Epiphany? Well, however appropriate they may have been in Jesus' infancy to signify his purpose, Christ doesn't need our gold or frankincense or myrrh (even if we had any). As we heard in the bass aria, even gold is vile vanity. Does the Word with which the worlds were called into being need anything we can dig up from the ground? We might as well offer a six-pack of tube socks or a singing necktie. No, Jesus wants to have your heart. As the divine king who would grow up to give his life, Jesus has gifted you through his blood with a new heart – a heart he desires for himself. Jesus desires that our hearts, infused now with his love and grace, would beat for the sake of the gospel. To give our hearts to Jesus means neither less nor more than placing our complete faith, trust, and hope in him – and in him, alone. With such hearts, we can live as gifts to others. With such hearts, we can stand against the King Herods of our time. With such hearts, we can, simply and finally, live.
7. On this bright Epiphany morning, we come into the presence of Jesus, the king of heaven become human to die for you. He is the One who came to pour out his blood that our lives would be forever infused with grace. It is he who makes your heart to beat in the hope-filled cadence of the gospel. The God who has everything has given everything for you, the Father not withholding even his only Son. And what does God want in return? Not much; only everything. God wants your heart. As the choir proclaimed "Now, my God, may I fall trusting into your hands (that) your honor more and more may ever be exalted." The gift we have to give to Jesus is to realize that we have

nothing to give, nothing but trusting hearts as we fall into his hands, charged hearts that live now for others. This is the effect that the gift of the Incarnation has caused. So arise! Wake up! The light now shines and the gift is given. God has become human. You who were dead are alive. Everything has changed, thanks be to God. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.