

Bearing Gifts

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 2:1-12

A memory was triggered for me just before Christmas. I must have been 8 or 9, and our church, Central Presbyterian Church in Zanesville, Ohio, was putting on some kind of Christmas pageant. It didn't have the spectacle of our nativity service on Christmas Eve or the Boars Head and Yule Log Festival, but still, it was a pretty big deal.

And either because I was the pastor's oldest kid and had a privileged place, or I was the pastor's oldest kid and nobody else wanted to do it, I had a role – I was, in fact, the "little drummer boy." My job was to journey through the congregation, dressed as the little drummer boy, while the choir sang the anthem of the same name. I was in costume, of course, with a tattered jacket and soot rubbed on my little 8 year old cheeks. I had a little drum that I pretended to play. I was, inarguably, adorable. There is even a picture of it somewhere, me with my bangs and bemused smile, drum in hand, ready to play.

That's the memory that was triggered. Warm 101.3, who began playing continuous Christmas music sometime around Labor Day, played that same version of the "Little Drummer Boy" from all those years ago. I hadn't heard it in a while.

The words have more theological profundity than you might remember, after all the "pa-rum-pum-pum-pums." "Baby Jesus, I am a poor boy too," reminding us of the poverty and vulnerable environment into which Jesus was born. "I have no gift to bring, to lay before the king."

I am not sure, either as a theatrical or biblical consideration, whether it's a promotion or demotion, but I am now a king in our pageant, with a little fancier costume and a container of frankincense rather than a small drum. But still, the question remains. We sang it, just more than a week ago and we will hear it again this afternoon – that question. "*What shall I give him?*"

Yesterday was Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas. “Epiphany” means something like “discovery,” or “revelation,” and has to do with the kings, the wise men, the magi, seeing the star in the sky and following it to Bethlehem to greet the newborn baby, the newborn king.

So much is going on in these few verses we just heard:

- The Magi, about whom we’ve heard nothing before and from whom we will hear nothing of hereafter.
- The star, about which astronomers have been puzzled for centuries.
- The deep threat felt by Herod from this little boy, and Herod’s deep fear as he wields his earthly power.
- Herod’s dealing with the kings, dripping with palace intrigue and political and religious implication.
- The magi’s actual arrival – “when they saw the star, they were overjoyed.” Overjoyed.
- The absolute and extraordinary juxtaposition of power and privilege and wealth with poverty and vulnerability as they bowed down before this child and his mother.
- Their wisdom made manifest as they return home by another way so as not to play into Herod’s evil plot.

And those gifts – “they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” Impractical gifts, perhaps. Maybe, as the joke goes, a casserole would have been more appropriate. But Isaiah says centuries earlier that this is what they would bring, and besides, in scale and symbolism, something of great value, something of great and sacred beauty, and something that, poignantly, would foreshadow this baby’s future.”

So many trajectories and implications. Yet, today...

- as an old year passes and a new one begins, filled with resolutions and intentions as this congregation gathers in a year of stewardship
- as we gather in the very cold
- as we gather in a cultural and political moment marked by division and uncertainty
- as we gather seeking hope
- as we gather as kings and drummer boys and everyone in between...

The question remains. *What shall I give him?*

The question presumes a response. In “In the Bleak Midwinter,” we are called to give him our heart. What would that look like, to give the baby Jesus our heart, our full devotion, our commitment, to be willing to follow him where his life leads, where his ministry takes us? Give my heart, both a daunting *and* liberating proposition that would recalibrate our life and living, our work and relationships, reframe how we view the world and how we live in it. How transforming it would be for us and for our broken and fearful world to aspire to that vision, to give our heart.

In “The Little Drummer Boy,” the question is posed and answered distinctively, not separated from the response of the heart, but more specific, more particularized. “Come, they told me. A newborn king to see. Our finest gifts we bring. To lay before the king. So to honor him.”

I am not sure who the “they” is to this little drummer boy, but the call is to go to the king and the presumption is that even this small boy has something to offer. Remember that. We all have something to offer. That makes this a stewardship story.

“Baby Jesus. I am a poor boy too. I have no gift to bring. To lay before the king.” We know that is bad theology, that we have no gift to bring, but it’s the theology that has conditioned us. Unless we have wealth, or credential, or relevant experience, we have little or nothing to offer. And the boy, perhaps a surrogate for all of us, believes that. Until he doesn’t. Until he has his own personal epiphany in the face of this collective epiphany. “Shall I play for you, pa rum pum pum pum? On my drum?”

Shall I play for you? Others will bring their gold and frankincense and myrrh. Others will bring their leadership. Others will bring their wisdom. Others will bring their voice. Others will bring their gifts. But I have a gift, too. I will play for you, on my drum, and join the chorus of rich and famous and poor and unnamed who will worship you by sharing what we have, by sharing who we are, by giving our heart in the way we are called to give it. To make a difference. That seems like the right answer. I will play my drum. And so we do.

I hadn’t thought about those words, that statement of faith, in many years, until I heard it again on the car radio just a few weeks ago. “I played my drum for him. I played my *best* for him.”

I don’t want to make too much of a song lyric, or overanalyze this. “I played my best for him.” My best. What would that look like? Our best? It doesn’t look like

several things. This is *not* success, not about optimizing potential and achieving peak performance. And it's *not* about performance, business or financial or the equivalent, winning more, improving times and percentages and the like.

It is about well-being and wholeness, giving the best of who God makes us to be, who God calls us to be – physical wellness, and emotional and relational and in particular spiritual wellness and wholeness.

We cannot fully give our hearts, we cannot fully seek to meet the needs of the world, if we are not tending to our own spirits and all that that implies. For some, a new year resolution helps that; for others it's just an invitation to fail and become more discouraged. But know that in this narrative that God gives us gifts to share, gifts to use for the common good, and the more we can remove personal stumbling blocks – whether behaviors or attitudes or other baggage – the more liberated we will be to fully offer our best, our gifts, our hearts.

So we look deeply inside our souls to discern our best, and what we need to do to be ready to respond.

And then we raise our sight and look around. Where is our best needed? Where does this baby need us to be? Where does our own iteration of gold, or frankincense, or myrrh get offered? Where do we play our drum? Where is there human need? Where is there human hurt? Where is our voice most needed, or our time, or our pocketbook? What would make this tiny baby smile when we show up?

The needs are so great and our gifts are so abundant. Where does need and gift connect, for you, for us?

We will celebrate communion in just a moment. As you come forward to the table, imagine yourself also coming forth to the manger, to the stable. What gifts do you bear? What can you give him? How will you play your drum for him? Amen.