

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

The Gifts We Bring

Matthew 2

January 5, 2024

Epiphany Sunday

In the well-loved story, the wise men come on a long journey following a star, bringing gifts for Jesus. Gold, the sign of royalty. Frankincense, signifying holiness; myrrh, a spice used in burial preparations, signifying death. Gold, frankincense, myrrh---prophetic, generous gifts brought and freely given to the infant Jesus. The story of the wise men is rich with all kinds of layered theological meaning—as the epiphany that gospel is revealed to be for all the world—but the things we remember the most are the gifts.

Inspired by the open-handed lavish generosity of the wise men, this is the season for gift giving. Or, if you believe in the song, today is the last day in the season for gift giving. On the 12th day of Christmas my true love gave to me, do you remember? 12 drummers drumming. Which raises all kinds of questions: is that a thing you want? Is that a think anyone wants? Legend has it that the 12 drummers represent the 12 tenets of the Apostle's Creed, just as Jesus is the partridge in a pear tree and the two turtle doves are the Old and New Testaments, and so on. I think that's all just the stuff of internet email chains, but I admit, I really like it. It works all the way through the song.

The wise men's gifts are memorialized in various Christmas songs, such as *The First Noel*, 5th verse:

*Then entered in those wise men three,
full reverently upon their knee,
and offered there in his presence
their gold, and myrrh, and frankincense,
Noel, noel, born is the king of Israel.*

There's also *We Three Kings of Orient Are*:

*Frankincense to offer have I,
incense owns a deity nigh,
prayer and praising, voices raising,
worshipping God on high.*

*Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom:
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

*O star of wonder, star of night,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to that perfect light.*

There are others, several others. You have to be impressed with any rhyming scheme for frankincense and myrrh. Which reminds me of Monty Suffern's terrible, wonderful joke: What did the third wise man say after the first two had given their gifts? "But wait, there's myrrh!"

Here's another gift that's been given to Jesus, if I may put it that way. A gift given from this community: \$665,536. On top of our financial contribution to the ministry and mission of the church through the annual budget, in 2024, we gave \$665,536 to the Giving Back, Building Forward campaign toward the new construction, renovation, and expansion of our children's building area. Where I come from, that's real money. If that's not real money where you come from, I'd like to have a conversation with you. I'm just amazed by that and want to take a moment with you today to be amazed together and to be grateful.

There's not a lot tangible to show for it yet, but there will be. We now have \$927K in the building fund. We'll need around 1.2 million to break ground. That's my estimate today. We'll know a lot more by the end of this month. But that's about where we are. We're getting close. The design plans are finishing up. The builder is getting ready to sharpen his pencil on costs. The process is getting closer. The campaign is getting closer. We're getting close, together. Because this is a Baptist church, and a Baptist church is nothing but a local, gathered community of Christians, this is how this works: these are gifts we each give to what we do together and to our future selves and to the future community and ministry of this church. What I've learned is in an undertaking like this is that through it all, we are invited to get closer—to be drawn closer to one another and to God.

There's a significance to it beyond the money. It's the intention behind each dollar. There's a story folded into each dollar, each decision. Those stories and those decisions are the stuff that generosity is made of, and by it we are transformed. It's all a real gift—a constellation of real gifts. Gifts generously and freely given, one, by one, by one after discussions at breakfast tables: What can we do? What should we do? What might we do? After crunching budget numbers and decisions to make sacrifices, after prayer and pledges and steps of faith, and sometimes leaps, of faith, the gifts came. One, after another, after another.

Before we head too far into a new year, I want to honor the past one, the spiritual meaning behind all of that. Because every dollar is a decision—a decision you have made, a prayer of trust you have offered. Every act a gift to this church and to the Lord. I believe that. I feel that in our own family's decisions and journey. What can feel daunting and like a burden, especially in the beginning, what can feel like a challenge and a sacrifice, feels like a joy—the joy you only get when you're giving a gift to those you love.

This is what it means to be part of church—taking part in a shared life of spiritual commitment. And let's never underestimate just how good and important that is. And what a gift it is to be part of.

In December, Julie de Graffenried, our resident Russia historian (and doesn't everyone have one or two of those laying around?) led an amazing presentation on the faithfulness of Russian Christians during the 20th century Soviet era. It has stuck with me. In that nation, with its heritage of rich, mystical Christian devotion, The Soviets distrusted Christianity because they thought the teachings of Jesus and way of life of Christians threatened and undermined their regime. Well, yes, they were right. The teachings of Jesus and the way of life of Christians tends to undermine most kingdoms of this world, from Herod, to West, to East.

In the East, Soviet-era communism suspected Christians of being a threat to the regime. Julie taught us that in 1929, the Law on Religious Associations dictated how a religious group could meet and practice. A congregation may be formed legally, if you have 20 people over 18 years old who are willing to list their names on an official application, submit it to the state, and then get approval from the State to meet.

To get approval you agreed to the following: no proselytism (that means evangelism), no activities for children under 18, no material aid for each other, no ritual objects, no legal rights, no fundraising, no activities outside of the designated building, no activities for people not registered. (Julie's notes, 12/21/24, also see footnote) ¹

In other words, in 20th century Soviet Union, a church basically couldn't do anything that our new building and all of this is intended for: activities for children and youth, to share hospitality and community over meals and time together, to reach out with the light of the gospel, to invite the wider community to retreat and renew their faith. and certainly, as you already know, the raising of funds that makes it all possible.

In other words, to be an official church under the Soviets, you had to agree to be individuals who are in the same place, at the same time, every once in a while, doing vaguely religious things, but without symbols or content, without openness to new people or teaching children and youth, without helping one another in material ways—no benevolence checks, no casseroles, no hospitality houses—no sharing the gospel. It's Christianity without the incarnation.

The incarnation of God in the flesh means that God's life is continuous with our inner life and life we share together. St. Paul's whole missionary journey to establish churches and share the gospel and bring different kinds of people together in Christian community is all rooted in this commitment to incarnational faith. In Ephesians, he writes: "Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages, in God, who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 3:8-12)

¹ <https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1929-2/churches-closed/churches-closed-texts/law-on-religious-organizations/>

The Soviets understood how a church is killed. You don't have to martyr the people; you just get them to agree to be gnostic individualists, who show up to a designated churchy building, but don't *do* life together. Then it doesn't matter if they call themselves whatever they want—they are hardly a church anymore, not in any way that has the power and the meaning that church can have to change the world and challenge the powers and principalities with the gospel of hope and love and justice and peace. They drained the life out of it—or they tried to.

The Soviets feared Christians, but they also underestimated them. Story after story Julie taught us emerges of Christians, even in the worst of Siberian prison camps, whose faith led them to bind together, not pull apart, to give to one another, even the clothes off their back, literally, and the last bites of food they had, literally. The Russian rulers underestimated the gospel of Jesus Christ which endured and outlasted the 20th century regime. And, let us pray, will do so again in the 21st century. Let us continue to pray for our brothers and sisters and the church in Russia and for peace.

The West has had its own challenges to the way of Jesus and connection with us here. In the early centuries, Christians were persecuted and killed all throughout the Roman empire for their faith. Some of them are known to us. One of those is young, 13-year-old Agnes of Rome, whose body was desired by a Roman governor's son. She refused him with some kind of extraordinary inner courage and strength and devotion to God alone. He had her arrested, abused, and ultimately, beheaded.

She was buried in a small grave outside the city walls, and soon, Christians came out to her gravesite to honor her and strengthen their faith. As they made pilgrimage, a small shrine was built and then a larger one was constructed to provide shelter for those who came out. A small chapel, then a sanctuary, then a larger one, and a renovated one, and things grew and changed over the decades and the centuries. Agnes' tomb, outside the city walls of Rome, became the site of a church growing—in numbers and in physical size. It actually grew quite large as over the centuries it was added to, changed, restored, renovated as new generations of people came to worship. Even today, it's still a vibrant congregation today. Some of this should sound familiar... We're also moving staircases, changing walls, opening up new entrances and closing existing ones, all of remembrance and in honor of all the ones who brought us to this point in the life together.

Churches are not museums that house nostalgia. They are living testimonies to the thousands of mystical and communal experiences that individuals have had and that they share with one another, and they hope to have again everytime the doors swing wide open. Churches change because they are alive.

At St. Agnes Church, in the apse at the front of the church, behind the altar in the center is a huge image of St. Agnes herself, her head is nodded, her eyes are lifted in prayer. She's in the center. This is her church. It's God's church, in the memory of her and her courage that has inspired generations and centuries of Christians and pilgrims. On one side of her is the image of the pope who was the main builder of the church as we know it in the 600s. He's

holding in his outstretched arms, cradling really, a miniature version of the church of St. Agnes. He's offering it, as a gift, to St. Agnes, offering it to God. I love this image. That one in particular in the church of St. Agnes and what it means for us. We offer the church to God as a gift. I believe we do the same—like the wise men's gifts, like St. Agnes's church... It's like this place is being cradled in our arms—our collective arms and offered to God. Soon it will be stone by stone. In the last year and for now, it is dollar by dollar. Over all these years, its been prayer by prayer and act of service by act of service and intention and tears and laughter and open doors and hospitality and welcome and service, countless, countless thousands of ways that you've cradled one another. That gift is being lifted up higher and higher, cradled in the arms of each person who reaches out to carry it, in every way that you do.

As we end one year and begin again...

Thank you for your gifts, wise men from the east who followed the star and introduced the world to the new king of Israel.

Thank you for your gifts, Russian Christians, who practiced true communal love and showed the whole world the power of the true church as the light of the world.

Thank you for your gift, Agnes, whose faithfulness to God endured even to death and taught the world about Christian courage.

Thank you for your gift, Roman Christians over the years, who grew the little church of Agnes into a beautiful, living, community and place of sweet spiritual life.

Thank you, you for who you are...for your gifts to Christ and to one another, that which we honored this morning, and the thousands of other ways you serve each other, in this community and far beyond. Your prayers are heard. Your sacrifices are honored. Your love is fertile. You stand on the shoulders of saints. You cradle the church of Jesus Christ in your arms, and you cradle her children in your arms. You remember and embody the incarnation of God in the flesh. You are a blessing, in this last year and in this year that begins now.

Amen.