

SUNDAY, January 5, 2025 EPIPHANY "Seeking Jesus?"

Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas is often seen as the day of gifts but the season of Christmas that is the 12 days between Christmas Day and Epiphany remind us that Christmas should not be celebrated for one day or 12 but truly over the entire year. What if you were to receive a gift every day of the year? Would we like this? Or would it be something that becomes routine? Also, it might make a difference as to what the gifts were and if they had real meaning?

Many people are familiar with the song "The 12 Days of Christmas" which has the recipient singing about all the gifts they have or will receive from their true love. If we were to add them all up it would be 364 gifts- one for every day of the year but Christmas Day. The value of all those gifts would be over \$200,000. But what does one do with swans and maidens? For many people this song is just a fun song to sing at Christmas but the gifts mentioned are the teachings of Christianity hidden in the numbers and as such the recipient of the gifts was truly loved as they were taught the message of Christ's love.

What are the gifts? 1- Partridge in a pear tree Jesus Christ; 2 Turtle Doves the Old and New testaments of the Bible; 3 French Hens the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity/love; 4 calling Birds- four Gospels/ evangelists of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; 5 Golden Rings are the first 5 books of the Old Testament which are the books of the Law (Pentateuch); 6 geese a laying-- 6 days of creation; 7 Swans a swimming- gifts of the Holy Spirit; 8 maids a milking- Beatitudes (Blessed are they..) 9 ladies dancing-- fruit of the Spirit; 10 lords a leaping- ten commandments; 11 Pipers- 11 faithful disciples 12 drummers- 12 points of the doctrine in the Apostle's creed. Gifts of the teachings about Jesus given in love for love to be shared and known through Him. But do we share these teachings?

Throughout advent and Christmas the prophets Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah referred to the coming of Jesus, the baby born in a stable in the town of Bethlehem. Isaiah also wrote for the need of the people to respond to this gift. This is what was shared in our reading from Isaiah 60. "Arise shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." This statement calls all who believe that Jesus came into the world to get up and do something! And Isaiah continues to state that all those who have fallen away from God will be gathered in from where they had scattered. Those who used to live in God's path will come together and they shall bring gifts of gold and frankincense and with these gifts they will also proclaim God's praise.

Did the people in Bethlehem know that the promised Messiah was in their midst? The only ones who did know were the shepherds who visited the family in the stable. Yes they left filled with joy but did they tell others? Yes, but were they believed? Would people have believed that angels told the shepherds that Jesus was born? Probably not so they needed people from away to tell them about the baby and who he was. Not everyone paid attention because the Messiah was an infant and dependent upon parents for survival. Many people did not think that the Christ was yet born because they were still living in oppression, and in poverty. IF the Christ had come he would have brought immediate changes to the people and lead them towards a better life in the society of the time. But this did not occur.

The story continues in the Gospel of Matthew that we read about Joseph taking Mary as his wife knowing that she was pregnant with the messiah. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem for registration and while there the baby is born. The baby is born in the stable, but being responsible parents, Mary and Joseph find suitable lodging. Mary is in no shape to travel back home again and so they stay in Bethlehem.

But in the meantime, astrologers- wise and learned men, saw a strange star in the western sky and as they lived east of Jerusalem. They knew something was special because the star was unusual and wanted to follow up as to why this star appeared lower yet brighter in the sky. So they decide to travel and see for it themselves this star which leads them in their search for the Messiah. They make their way by camels and it takes time- there were no trains, cars, planes. They know that they won't see the baby as a small infant. They travel along together, camping stopping and going as they can, day after day. Finally they pull into Jerusalem and ask to those on the streets about their business, where can we find the King of Jews born not too long ago? They ask this to those on the street but do not get clear answers. They search for the Messiah without knowing what to do. To whom should they turn?

They raise some concern in the city as they keep asking people about this new king. With the word on the street about a new king, King Herod is frightened, and calls together the chief priests and scribes of the people. He asks where this Messiah was to be born and he learns that it is Bethlehem. Herod then calls the travellers to see him, asks them about the star that appeared, and then he sent them to Bethlehem. King Herod gives them the order to go and search diligently for the child and states. 'when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

The Wise Men now under the direction of King Herod set out and ahead of them is the star which they had seen rise and continue to shine. It is this sign of the star that leads them to where the child was. This too was not a five minute ride but was 8.89 km or 5.52 miles.

Who were they -- these travelers from the mysterious East, who sometime after the birth of the baby arrive in Bethlehem with expensive gifts? They appear for a moment and are quickly gone. The text calls them wise men. They are known by various names, as magi, astrologers, astronomers, philosophers, mystics or scientists whose interests stretched far beyond Israel. Tradition has assigned them names and races as in the "We 3 Kings" song sung earlier. And by the three gifts they brought this leads us to assume there were three wise men searching for the infant child.

But who they were, where they came from or what they were about remain buried in history and legend. Like all of us at our best, they were on a quest, hungry for light in a dark world, eager to find that which was greater than themselves. Their story is more than a pleasant tale. All we need to remember is that they were from a distance away and travelled this over land to see the boy. It would have taken them time to arrive at Joseph's doorstep after having been in Jerusalem. Joseph could have refused them entry, but he did not. There was a reason for these men to visit- They had been searching for him for a while, they knew that God had promised the people a messiah and they wanted to see him for themselves. They were overwhelmed with joy!

After their learning about the messiah, they final go to see Jesus a young child with Mary his mother. And in those moments time stands still. East meets West as gifts are offered and received. Gifts that a young child probably wouldn't be overjoyed seeing or receiving. But gifts that indicated God's message of hope was now spreading far beyond Jerusalem and to people who were searching!

The gifts represent these Wise Men and their prayers for the Messiah who came to save His people. The gifts offered over two thousand years ago, gold, frankincense and myrrh were worth (in today's equivalents), six hundred, five hundred and four thousand dollars per pound, respectively. A similar gift today (frankincense and myrrh have declined in value, gold has increased) would set a 20th century king back six thousand dollars for the gold, but only fifteen dollars apiece for frankincense and myrrh. The Magi celebrated the Christ child with the most valuable items in the ancient world. But these gifts were not just of monetary value. They were also gifts of health and long life. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were among the earliest and

most prized curative medicines in the ancient world. The Wise Men knew something about what was to occur with the Messiah that many people did not want to hear or understand.

The message that the Messiah had been born to all people was definitely received through these Wise Men who travelled so far to see Him, and they were probably not observing Jewish traditions. But something happened that day when they were in His presence! They believed in the one they worshiped paying him homage to him in respect. After such a long journey, they had seen the Messiah/ the promised one of God. That night as they rested from their journey and visit with Jesus' family, they dreamed of returning home, but also warned not to return to King Herod. When they were ready to go back home, they went by a different route.

As we retell the story of the Wise Men and their search for Jesus, we might wish to ask what you are seeking as we begin 2025? World peace is often #1 but specifically what are you seeking and hoping when it comes to knowing Jesus? What is it that God is leading us to do in this year of celebrations-- 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UCC' and 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of GUC? What is our mission and just what is God asking us to search for – to learn about Jesus or to know him in new ways? Wise people are searching for answers to every day questions on how to live. We still are searching how best to live in peace. Many are hopeful that ceasefires and wars will end this year for all time, but when we read of ongoing wars, as well as natural disasters occurring-- we need to keep searching for how we as individuals and as a church family can share hope.

When the Wise Men met Jesus and his parents they were overjoyed. Are you filled with the joy of Jesus? They have journeyed far to this this Promised One of God. They worship and honour him with gifts given in love. And their joy is complete. For Mary this is an experience of joy as well for these Eastern visitors are the first to know about Jesus as God's Son. Her joy overflows as the beginning of Jesus' life starts to unfold.

As we look to the words of the 12 Days of Christmas our hope is that we will understand God's purpose for our lives as we seek Jesus to show us how to live and to love. But how do we fully understand God's gift to us in Jesus? We cannot leave him in the manger, he is growing up quickly. As a toddler he receives gifts which will help him in the future. And for Jesus his future begins after the Wise Men leave.

This is our task now- the work of Christmas begins for us. Christ's light is here and is amongst us. It is up to you now to seek Jesus? And come to know him as Christ not just for today because God's gift to you is given each day. You are the beloved children of God.

We must continue to seek Jesus, find and experience his love and know in our hearts that He came to earth through Love for us all. His purpose will be revealed in time yet for us who know some of his story, we can rest assured that through Christ Jesus we will experience the wonder of God's glory someday. Wise people seek Jesus. Are you?

Let us pray.

God of grace and love help us to know you and to search for Christ to be in our lives in new ways this New Year. Enable us to arise and shine because Christ's light shines in us and for us through faith and hope. Show us the path you would have us take. Lead us and guide us we pray. Amen.