

WHAT I CAN, I GIVE HIM

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a kid, I used to call my friends on Christmas afternoon and ask, “What did you get for Christmas?” It was fun to talk with Fred or Skip or Bob or Charlie or Johnny or Brad and find out what new toys Santa had brought them. I also remember writing thank-you notes to my grandparents and listing everything I got for Christmas. Looking back on those days, I can’t remember a single time when I asked one of my buddies, “What did you give for Christmas?” When we talk about Christmas “gifts,” we usually mean the gifts that were given to us.

Of course, Christmas really is about the greatest gift ever given – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (John 3:16) At the end of his instructions and encouragement to the Christians at Corinth about giving to the offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem, the apostle Paul wraps up his whole discussion of stewardship by exclaiming, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15)

In light of what God has given us in his Son Jesus Christ – and what Jesus has given us by dying on the cross for our sins – it’s worth thinking about what we can give him in return. Obviously, there is nothing at all that we can ever give or do that will repay God for his gracious gift. Then again, if we **could** somehow repay God for his grace in Jesus Christ, it really wouldn’t be a gift. In fact, if we could somehow repay God for his grace in Jesus Christ, we might not even need that grace in the first place. But we do need that grace, and it comes as a gift.

Just because we can’t ever repay God for his gracious gift doesn’t mean we have nothing to give Jesus in return. Tradition has it that one of the main reasons we give gifts at Christmas is because the wise men “knelt down and paid [the child] homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

I suppose you’ve heard it asked, “Do you know what would have happened if it had been Three Wise Women instead of Three Wise Men?” The answer, of course, is, “They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts, and there would be peace on earth.” I saw a cartoon this week that shows four women standing by the crib in the manger, with the caption, “After the three wise men left, the three wiser women arrived.” One woman says, “Casseroles for the week.” The second woman says, “Fresh diapers and formula.” The third woman points to the fourth woman and says, “In-home nanny.”

Yeah, wise gifts! Certainly not like gold, frankincense, and myrrh for a little child. How practical are those gifts? Not very; but then, maybe it's not always necessary to give practical gifts. In fact, some of the most extravagant and seemingly unnecessary gifts – the ones that make you say, “Ah, you shouldn’t have!” – are the ones that can have the most meaning.

There’s a lot of significance in the arrival of these three strange visitors from afar, men who were not Jews yet followed a star, looked for the baby, and brought gifts fit for a king. Although there is really no way to know whether Matthew meant it this way or not, many people have suggested that the wise men’s gifts have great meaning for who this child is and what this child will do. Gold was fit for a king – and we know Jesus as the King of kings. Frankincense was used in offerings in worship – and we know Jesus as the Son of God. And myrrh was a perfumed spice used to anoint dead bodies – and we know Jesus to be the suffering servant who died for our sins. That final gift of myrrh makes you think about Mary anointing Jesus’ feet with a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard. Judas was incensed at the apparent wastefulness and complained, “Why was this perfume not sold for a year’s wages and the money given to the poor?” But Jesus appreciated the gift and said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.”

The margin note next to the Offering in today’s bulletin is a quote from the last lines of O. Henry’s short story, “The Gift of the Magi.” It’s a story of a young, struggling couple, Jim and Della, who want to buy each other precious Christmas gifts. Jim wants to buy Della a beautiful set of hair combs. O. Henry wrote, “Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to deprecate Her Majesty’s jewels and gifts.” Della wants to buy Jim a platinum fob chain for the gold watch that had been his grandfather’s and father’s.

Perhaps you know how the story goes. The only asset Della has to sell is her beautiful hair for \$20 to Madame Sofronie at Hair Goods of All Kinds. The only thing of value Jim has to sell is his gold watch, which he sells to buy the hair combs Della had admired in a Broadway window.

The story ends with the observation in today’s margin. But that’s not the whole quote. O. Henry finishes his story this way: “And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.”

A couple of Christmas songs came to mind as I thought about what we can give to Jesus – not just at Christmas, but every day of the year.

The little drummer boy sings, “Come, they told me, pa rum pum pum, A newborn King to see . . . Our finest gifts we bring to lay before the King . . . So to honor Him when we come.” Of course, the problem is, “I am a poor boy too pa rum pump um pum . . . I have no gift to bring that’s fit to give a King . . . Shall I play for you on my

drum?” And he finishes, “Mary nodded pa rum pump um pum . . . the ox and ass kept time. I played my drum for Him . . . I played my best for Him . . . Then He smiled at me, me and my drum.” The little drummer boy gave Jesus what he had, and he gave it the best he could.

We hear the same message in the Christmas song we sang during Advent, not once but twice! “In the Bleak Midwinter” tells the story of Jesus’ birth and the glory of heaven and angels that came along with the baby in the stable place. In the last verse, Christina Rosetti then turns to what we can offer Jesus: “What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him: give my heart.”

What can we give Jesus? Give my heart . . . or, as the apostle Paul writes to the Roman Christians, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12:1) When Paul talks about “your bodies,” he doesn’t mean just the flesh and bones that we walk around in. He means “your total selves.” Think about Jesus saying, “The first commandment is this: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30) In other words, with your total self. *The Message* puts it this way: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.”

As we begin a new year, let us think about what we can and will give Jesus. The gift-giving of Christmas may be behind us as the world moves on to college bowl games and the Super Bowl and Valentine’s Day. But we have the chance each and every day to place our lives before God as an offering, to give Jesus something. When Paul commended the churches of Macedonia for their generosity to the offering for the Christians in the Jerusalem church, he mentioned how “they gave themselves first to the Lord.” (2 Cor. 8:5)

Shirley Carlton brought me a copy of the December 1997 church newsletter that she ran across in her house. She thought I might be interested in the front-page article that was written by the editor, Margaret Glasgow. To those of you who came to the church after Margaret Hall died, all I can say is you missed knowing one fine lady and a real character!

In her editor’s note, Margaret Hall noted that she first wrote the article for a newsletter in 1990, but decided to reprint it since “today our church and our nation face much similar circumstances as they did in those days of seven years, that it seems timely to reprint it.”

The title “Where Are the Wise Men?” plays off a question from her teenaged sons who decorated the house for Christmas while Margaret Hall and Sam went out. They couldn’t find the new set of wise men she had bought the previous January to replace the one wise man who had lost an arm, the other who was split down the back, and the

third who “looked as though he had crossed the desert too many times.” When she and Sam came home, the boys asked, “Mother, where are the wise men?”

I won’t read the whole article, but Margaret Hall’s closing thoughts are a good guide for us as we think about what we can give this year:

“Wise men and women are needed on this earth . . . to face the immediate serious crisis, to lead nations into paths of security and opportunity, to stem the curse of disease and poverty, and to maintain ‘peace on earth.’

“Wise men and women are needed in this nation . . . to demand leaders who will proceed vigorously and judiciously, not submitting to pressures of gain and greed, to address moral and social evils that are undermining many today, and to reaffirm our founding fathers’ dreams of ‘one nation under God.’

“Wise men and women are needed in this church . . . to provide leadership and comfort, to assume responsibility and control when various needs arise, and to encourage and nourish each other as we strive to follow the ‘star.’

“Where are the wise men? Let us hope for them in our world, in our nation, and in our community, because wise men are those who seek the Christ and bring to Him the ‘treasure’ of their own abilities and talents. In this holy season, let us all pray for such wisdom.”

Let us pray: God of light, shining in darkness, through a little child, born in Bethlehem, you open to us the treasure of your grace. Help us to search diligently for him, so that we may offer our lives to you with thanksgiving, joy, and praise; through Jesus Christ, the rising star.
Amen.