



“Gift-Giving”

January 3, 2010

Mathew 12:1-12

How many kings are mentioned in this story? Sorry to begin the new year with a test, but this is one of those passages where many have leapt to unfounded conclusions. The answer is two. The text mentions King Herod, a treacherous and paranoid ruler, who killed anyone he suspected as a threat to his throne, including his wife. The other king is the babe of Bethlehem, Jesus.

The characters in the story who prompted the Christmas hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are” are not actually kings. Our text calls them “wise men.” The Greek word is “magi” which means “astrologers.” It’s even possible that there could have been some wise women among them. And as for how many there were, it is anyone’s guess. The passage never says. The traditional number of three stems from the number of gifts given to Jesus: gold, frankincense and myrrh, all of which you can still purchase in Jerusalem.

Some ancient interpreters put the number of magi at 12, but no one really knows. Contemporary scholars doubt that only three would have made this long journey together, and assume a caravan of unknown size. So, later in the service, when we sing “We Three Kings,” you are welcome to substitute any number you’d like.

Another confusing part of this story comes from our Christmas pageants and nativity scenes. We tend to conflate the shepherds visit with the arrival of the magi. We have no idea how much time passed from the time the magi spotted the star, made their trip to Jerusalem, met with Herod, and then proceeded on to Bethlehem. However, King Herod’s order to kill all of the children in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger suggests an extended time.

What is not in dispute in this passage is that this story is about gift giving. The magi make the journey to Bethlehem to give gifts to the newborn king.

At Christmas we celebrate the gift God has given us – Jesus Christ. And as an expression of thanks and praise for this gift of God-with-us, we share our gifts with God. What gifts do you give to God? What specific gifts do you give?

When Jesus became a man, he taught his followers that the way we treat one another is how we treat him. If we neglect each other’s needs, we neglect Christ. If we treat one another with compassion, we give a gift to Christ.

John Buchanan, the senior pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago tipped me off to a children's book that I purchased this past week and plan to give to my grandchildren. I'd like to share the story with you.

It is June 2002 and a young man who has been attending Stanford University has gone home to his Maasai village in a remote part of Kenya. His name is Kimeli and he has been away from his country for a long time.

“Once the Maasai were feared warriors, but now they live peaceably as nomadic cattle herders. They treat their cows as kindly as they do their children. They sing to them. They give them names. They shelter the young ones in their homes. Without the herd, the tribe might starve. To the Maasai, the cow is life.”

“A child asks Kimeli if he has brought any stories. He nods. He has brought one story with him, a story that has burned a hole in his heart.”

In a tradition as old as the Maasai, the tribe gathers under an acacia tree to hear the story. There is a terrible stillness in the air as the tale unfolds. Kimeli tells of buildings so high they touch the sky. Fires so hot they melt iron. Smoke and dust so thick they block out the sun. More than three thousand souls are lost. And as the story ends, a great silence falls over the Maasai.”

“Kimeli knows his people. They are fierce when provoked, but moved to kindness when they hear of suffering and injustice.”

“One of the elders speaks. “What can we do for these poor people?”

“Nearby a cow lows and heads turn toward the herd. Kimeli offers his only cow and asks for the people's blessing. They give their blessing, but want to do something more.”

“The tribe sends word to the United States Embassy in Nairobi that they want to speak to someone. The embassy sends a diplomat. As his jeep bounces along the rugged roads, the American wonders what complaint the elders might have.”

“But when he reaches the village, he discovers that he has been invited to a special ceremony. Hundreds of Maasai in their brilliant red tunics and spectacular beaded collars greet him. He can only marvel at their songs, dancing and speeches.”

“Then, everyone gathers on a sacred knoll apart from the village. The only sound is the gentle chiming of cowbells. The elders chant a blessing and then present a gift: fourteen cows for America. Because there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort.”¹

As we embark on this new year, I encourage you to walk through these twelve months with a vulnerable heart. Dare to let those who suffer touch you deeply. And keep in mind: There is no

one so blessed that she/he has no needs. And you are never so empty or inadequate that you have no gift to give.

NOTES

1. I have condensed this story from Carmen Deedy's wonderful book, *14 Cows For America*, (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2009).