

1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'

7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

After kissing a lot of toads, my friend Julie had finally found her prince and was getting married. She was so happy. Wanting to add to her happiness, I went to Victoria's Secret to buy her wedding shower gift. I found something, although there wasn't much of the something, red and risqué, perfect for the occasion. I wrapped Julie's gift in shiny silver paper and tied a little wedding bell to the package. I was one of the first to arrive at the shower. I signed the guest book and put the present on the gift table—chuckling to myself as I did. I was delighted to greet some of Julie's old friends from high school, a couple of our friends from seminary, and Julie's aunt Clara who is an absolute hoot. I thought it was time to get the party started and asked the hostess if she needed any help getting things rolling. She replied that we should wait a bit because most of the ladies from the church hadn't arrived yet. Thinking of what was inside that box all wrapped up in shiny silver paper with a little wedding bell tied on top I asked, "Uh, what ladies from the church?" The hostess replied, "Oh, Julie's mom put an open invitation for the shower in the church newsletter." And it was about that time that the Episcopal octogenarians began arriving. They came in car loads. There must have been at least twenty of them. I watched as they heaped their gifts on top of the box wrapped in shiny silver paper with a little wedding bell tied on top. I went through the shower in a daze of anxiety, dreading the time when we would all put our chairs in a circle and ooh and ahh as Julie opened her gifts and then passed them around the circle for everyone to admire—the Tupperware bowls, the candle holders, the monogrammed bath towels, the casserole dish, the crystal goblets, the divided vegetable tray with the little dish for dip in the middle. And as the mound of gifts got smaller and smaller—it seemed that the shiny silver package with the little wedding bell tied on top got shinier and shinier—daring Julie to notice it and open it next. Oh if only I could get that gift back. Why hadn't I gone to Macy's and

gotten her a set of 250 thread count sheets . . . Needless to say, when the little wedding bell was untied from the top of the package and the shiny silver paper torn off, my gift did NOT get passed around the circle of shower guests.

My shower gift was clearly inappropriate under the circumstances. As some of us were reminded of over this past month, gift exchanges can be difficult under the best of circumstances—did you spend too little and now you look like a cheapskate or did you spend too much leaving the recipient feeling awkward—should you even have given the gift in the first place. In a culture in which most of us have enough of what we need, gift giving can indeed be a tricky endeavor and we're bound, on occasion, to give a gift that, because of circumstances we did not anticipate, is inappropriate.

And this is what I have often thought of the gifts the Magi gave the baby Jesus—fine in and of themselves but really quite inappropriate under the circumstances. Okay, so I understand the gold, it could easily have been put into a college fund for the newborn Messiah—but frankincense and myrrh? Both of these aromatic substances are used in perfumes, aromatherapy, and for anointing. In fact, myrrh was used as an embalming ointment to help mask the stench of decaying flesh. Why would you give these to a baby? And what would inspire these supposedly “wise” men to schlep these valuable—although rather worthless under the circumstances—gifts miles and miles across the desert to bring to the newborn King of the Jews? After all, they weren't even Jews, they were probably Zoroastrian priests from Persia.

The magi were likely what we would think of as astrologers—supported by the fact that they were following a star to Bethlehem. They must have been people of means—as witnessed to by the gifts they brought for Jesus and the fact that they had the resources to travel. Chances are good that they were highly-respected and admired in their home villages where their religious practices were the norm. But there was something about their curiosity and wonder, their conviction that there was a greater power than themselves, that led them away from the safety and security of their homes into the foreign lands of the Roman Empire. If you've seen the movie, *The Nativity*, you've seen an engaging interpretation of these fellows as absent-minded professors—intelligent, good-hearted, and not tied to the rules and norms of society. They were fascinated with the ways and norms of other cultures and wanted to honor the other. And so they brought gifts fit for royalty, frankincense, gold, and myrrh, gifts fit for a king, who just happened to be a baby. For surely that is who the magi expected to meet on their journey—royalty. Surely they imagined that the star would lead them to some sort of royal palace where their gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh would be added to the stores of these supplies that would have been common in royal palaces. In this case, their gifts were appropriate and indeed would likely have been expected.

But we know that's not how the story goes. For one thing, when the magi finally arrived at the place to which the star had guided them, they did not find themselves at a royal palace. I imagine that when they arrived at a plain, stone home with no evidence of the trappings of royalty or wealth—they checked the address on the invitation one more time just to make sure they were in the right place. But still, even though they weren't getting what they expected, still they got off of their camels and went into the home and "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."

In Matthew's gospel, the magi "get it." They understand what many did not—that though this baby is the king of the Jews, his birth still brought hope to all the world. And because the magi recognize the immensity of who and what this baby is, they bring him gifts and they worship him. They honor him. We learn from the Magi what the true and most important gift that we can give is—the gift of ourselves and worship—a far better gift indeed. The magi didn't put the frankincense, gold, and myrrh on the gift table, munch on a few appetizers, and then make their excuses to leave. No, the magi, upon just seeing Jesus, fell to their knees and worshipped him. Even though they were priests of a different faith, followers of astrology, and likely worshippers of nature, they couldn't resist the compelling pull that this child had upon their lives. Indeed, God acted upon them while they were still hundreds of miles away in Persia, pulling them with the light of a star to something new and different, something plain and yet magnificent.

The magi's gift of their presence foreshadows the gift that Jesus gives his followers time and time again—the gift of his presence. He is present to people when everyone else has made their absence known. Think of the woman at the well—shunned by her people and rejected by society. Living a life in which love and joy and acceptance are absent. Into that absence comes the present of Christ. And there was Zaccheus, a tax collector, despised by people, shamed by his crime—hiding in a tree. Living a life in which integrity and self-respect and community are absent. Into that absence comes the present of Christ. And then there's Mary, gone to the tomb to prepare her teacher's body for burial. Living a life in which hope and promise and security are suddenly absent. Into that absence comes the present of Christ.

And then there's the man who sits alone in his room at TenderCare. Living a life in which family and memory and self-reliance are absent. Into that absence comes the present of Christ. And then there's the teenage girl who, in an effort to feel something, anything at all, takes a razor blade to her own skin. Living a life in which support and friendship and understanding are absent. Into that absence comes the present of Christ. And then there's us—worshipping here on this Epiphany—exhausted from the holidays, anxious about the future, sitting here with many a thought in our hearts and minds. Living lives in which trust and affirmation and peace of mind are too often absent. And into this absence comes the present of Christ. A present, a gift, so appropriate, so needed—a far better gift than any we could have ever

imagined. Come, eat & drink, take in the presence, the far better gift is yours to savor, the presence of Jesus Christ.