

# “Gifts that Keep Giving: Epiphanies”

Matthew 2:1-12 <sup>1</sup>

Well, now that we’ve survived another December, how did you do in finding gifts for your friends and loved ones this time around? Where did you look to find something “for the person who has everything?” A list of helpful places for finding unusual gifts might include Brookstone, Levenger, SkyMall catalogs on airplanes, Amazon, and, of course, eBay.

As you may know, this week includes a day on which the church commemorates some of the most famous gifts ever given by one human to another. January 6 is a holy day known as “Epiphany,” celebrating the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. The word “epiphany” means “appearance” or “manifestation,” growing out of the fact that the arrival of the Wise Men called attention once again to the uniqueness of the infant Jesus, who was probably about six months old.

We don’t know their names or who they really were. The Greek New Testament calls them μάγῃ (Magi) which is the plural of μάγος (magos), from which we get our word “magician.” Rather than dealing in illusions and sleight of hand as magicians do these days, these men may have been priests, philosophers, soothsayers, or astrologers. We should probably consider them among the scientists of their day, well-versed in what was then known of astronomy.

Having come from “the east,” the Magi may have learned about the prophecies of the Messiah’s birth from the descendants of the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon centuries before.<sup>2</sup> And when they saw the prophesied signs appear in the heavens, they set out to investigate for themselves.

Nor do we know how many of them there were. We get the idea that there were three magi from the three gifts recorded in the story, but there could have been more than this.

As you probably remember, the gold the Magi presented to Jesus was the kind of gift that might be given to a king. Frankincense was the tool of priests; and myrrh was an aromatic resin frequently used in embalming—a burial gift for prophets who had been martyred because of the divine messages they delivered. These were gifts for One who would become a Prophet, a Priest, and a King; and these three gifts, expensive as they were, probably provided the financial resources Joseph and Mary needed for their flight to Egypt under cover of darkness to avoid Herod’s fury.

We might also note that the Magi brought gifts to Jesus. They didn’t ask for gifts. You and I frequently get that all mixed up and backward, thinking of God in terms of what we think God might give to us, rather than in terms of what we might be able to give to God.

The idea of “epiphany” is the revealing of something—or someone—overlooked or undiscovered. A friend told me just this week about a recent experience he had during the greeting time at his church. After milling around and greeting folk as we also do, he returned to his seat to discover that he had completely overlooked and disregarded a couple sitting right next to him on the pew. These two persons were not dressed in fashionable clothing as most others were, and he had allowed them to become invisible until the epiphany of ashamed discovery when he returned to his seat.

And of course, if Jesus were to actually attend worship with us today, He would most likely be dressed in very ordinary clothes, even as He was in New Testament times. It was the

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on January 2, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 60:1-6; Micah 5:2. See also the Dead Sea Scrolls, *Damascus Document* 7.18-21; *Testimonia* 9-13.

fact that Jesus did indeed seem so ordinary and unremarkable that caused the appearance of the Magi to create such a stir.

The truth of the matter seems to be that God prefers small over large—small and hidden, actually.<sup>3</sup> Jesus told us that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It's like yeast. It's like one perfect pearl. It's like finding one lost sheep, or just one lost coin or just one lost son. It belongs to little children and to others who are “small” in the eyes of those who think themselves important.

As Paul reminded the Corinthians, *“few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considered foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important”* (1 Corinthians 1:26-28).

After all, God arranged for Jesus to grow up in Nazareth, a town of low reputation, and God chose to have Jesus be unremarkable in appearance as well (Isaiah 53: 2; John 1:46). Who would have expected that the Son of the Eternal God would spend His days on earth among the blind, the lame, the outcast, and the lost, or that He would hold up as eternally significant the use of a loaf of bread, a towel, and a cup of water? Who would have ever dreamed that the long-awaited Messiah who came to save the world would have time to bounce a little child on His knee? Who would have ever thought it?

It’s actually pretty easy for us to miss what God is doing, since God’s Kingdom usually comes quietly, and in ways we don’t expect. God’s ways are not our ways, and God seldom trumpets His work . . . though sometimes He does (Isaiah 55:8-9; Exodus 19:16-19). When God became flesh, the world did not recognize Him, though it had been made by Him (John 1:10). We just never really know when He might show up, even now.

I suggest to you this morning that epiphanies are experiences with God that take our lives in unexpected and redemptive directions. After the Magi had found Jesus and had worshiped Him, God warned them in a dream to go home by a different route than they had planned. Finding Jesus almost always means that our lives, too, take a different direction; and we would really be better off not looking for Him unless we intend to follow the Way He gives.

In my experience, at least, epiphanies have usually been experiences in which God has been at work to bring me back to Him when my life has gotten off track. The first five of the seven experiences I would call epiphanies in my own life were of that sort, while the last two have been encouragements to keep steady on the path I was following.<sup>4</sup>

I’ve probably told you about this one before, but my epiphany that most resembled Paul’s words to the Corinthians happened in Louisville in October, 1990, just over twenty years ago. Desert Storm was underway in Iraq, and the amphibious force to which I was assigned was in the desert. We who were Active Reservists lived from day to day knowing that with just one day’s notice, we could be mobilized to war.

I was writing my Ph.D. dissertation, a project of more than a year’s duration, and on this particular afternoon I was in my graduate office on the third floor of the seminary library, musing

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<sup>3</sup> David Neff, “A Perfect Pearl,” [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com), 12.16.08. See Matthew 13:31-46; Luke 15.

<sup>4</sup> For my own record, these seven epiphanies occurred (1) beside the Cazadero River in northern California in July, 1970; (2) in the science building at Georgetown College in March, 1972; (3) in my bedroom in Memphis in December, 1979; (4) in our basement in Louisville in November, 1985; (5) in my Ph.D. study carrel at Southern Seminary in October, 1990; (6) at my desk at St. Matthews Baptist Church in December, 1999; and (7), when I received an email from Mike Harton in June, 2001.

as I looked out the window. What I was thinking was something like this: “It’s really supremely stupid that I’ve gone to school for as long as I have and am so close to finishing this thing, when I’m about to be sent off to war and be killed just before I’m done.”

And as soon I had that thought, God said sternly to me, “Just listen to yourself! You’re sitting there thinking more of yourself than you ought to think; as though you are more important to me than those young men and women who are indeed over there getting killed this afternoon. What a cheeky, arrogant attitude you have! How unaware you are of what I really care about.”

Well, that was an epiphany, and I repented of my arrogance. Once again, God was choosing ways the world thought foolish in order to shame those who thought they were wise.

Brennan Manning is a Franciscan priest who has written many things that I find helpful. One of these is the story about how he got the name “Brennan.” While growing up, his best friend’s name was Ray. The two of them did everything together: they bought a car together as teenagers, they double-dated together, they even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together. One night while they were sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade flew into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan’s life was spared.

When Brennan later became a priest he was told to take on the name of a saint. He remembered his friend, Ray Brennan, and took on the name “Brennan.” Years later, he went to visit Ray’s mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, “Do you think Ray loved me?”

Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan’s face and shouted, “What *more* could he have done for you?!” Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus’ mother Mary pointed to her son and shouted, “What *more* could He have done for you?”<sup>5</sup>

Epiphanies are “gifts that keep on giving.” They change how we see ourselves and how we see life from that point forward. The visit of the Magi was an epiphany for the citizens of Bethlehem and it was a confirming epiphany for Joseph and Mary. My epiphany in the library has many times reminded me not to think more highly of myself than I ought to think (Romans 11:20; Galatians 6:3). And Brennan Manning’s epiphany about how the love of his friend Ray illustrated Jesus’ love for him has empowered his thinking and writing for many years.

The question before us this morning, then, is whether we have paid sufficient attention to the many, many ways in which God continues to try to get our attention and to redirect our lives toward eternally significant things. Perhaps the most important gift the Magi brought was themselves—they showed up. That’s the first thing we have to do, too—to place ourselves at Jesus’ disposal so He can transform our lives.

The Magi didn’t ask Jesus to do anything for them. They asked themselves what they could do for Him. Twenty Christmas Eves ago last week, Bill Tuck asked our congregation in Louisville what we were going to bring to the manger that year. And when I asked that question in our family devotions later that evening, Anna responded, “I want to give him my heart.” That’s the very best gift of all, and it is the first gift without which we can bring nothing else to Him.

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<sup>5</sup> Lee Eclov, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com), adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows* (InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 142.

Walter Wangerin is another author I like. On Christmas Eve, 1944, Walter had a ten year-old epiphany. The run-up to Christmas had been as it always was. His father had locked himself in a particular room in the house, decorated the tree, and put the presents under it. All the children then stood outside that door off and on for days, wondering and dreaming about what had been prepared for them . . . every child except Walter.

Walter later wrote, “I had that very year become an ‘adult’: silent, solemn, watchful, and infinitely cautious.” The change had come because on Christmas morning the year before, his brother Paul had inexplicably burst into tears, ruining the joy of the Christmas celebration; and Paul’s deep sadness had affected his brother indelibly.

“I was shocked to discover that the Christmas time was not inviolate,” Walter wrote. “I was horrified that pain could invade the holy ceremony. And I was angry that my father had not protected my brother from tears. Besides, what if you hope and it doesn’t happen? It’s treacherous to hope. The harder you hope, the more vulnerable you become.”

And so, when the door was finally opened on Christmas morning, Walter did not run in the room with joy as the other children did. He stood in the doorway, frowning.

When Walter’s gaze met his father’s, Walter had an epiphany that left him in tears of a different sort. As Walter looked at his father, he saw the hope, the yearning, indeed, the painful expectation that waited for his son to choose to receive his gifts. “This thing I had never seen before,” Walter wrote, “that my father, too, had to trust in promises against disappointments. And among the promises to which my father had committed his soul, his hope, and his faith, the most important one that morning was this: that his eldest son should soften and be glad.

“He gazed at me, waiting, waiting, for me, waiting for his Christmas to be received by his son and returned to him again. And I began to cry. O, my father!

“What was this room, for so long locked, which I was entering? Why, it was my own heart. And why had I been afraid? Because I thought I’d find it empty, a hard, unfeeling thing. But there, in the room, was my father. And there, in my father, was the love that had furnished this room, preparing it for us . . . desiring our joy. *And what else could such a love be, but my Jesus drawing near?*

“I leaned my cheek against the doorjamb and grinned like a grown-up ten years old, and sobbed as if I were two. And my father moved from the middle of the room and gathered me to himself. And I put my arms around him, and both of us were full.”<sup>6</sup>

As Christina Rossetti put it in her famous verse, “What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I’d give Him a lamb. If I were a Wise Man, I’d do my part. But what can I give Him? I’ll give Him my heart.”<sup>7</sup>

“More light than we can learn, more wealth than we can treasure, more love than we can earn, more peace than we can measure, because one Child is born.”<sup>8</sup> What gift will you bring?

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Wangerin, Jr., *The Manger is Empty* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), pp. 57-66.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Rossetti, “In the Bleak Midwinter,” 1872.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Fry.