

# “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.

If you had been invited to the Governor’s Christmas party, what gift do you think you might have taken? How about Christmas at the White House? Would you have chosen something expensive, elaborate, extravagant, and unusual? Our text this morning in Matthew 2 highlights some of the most famous gifts ever given.

As you may know, January 6 is a holy day on the Christian calendar known as “Epiphany,” celebrating the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. It also marks the end of “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” 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.

The Wise Men didn’t actually visit Jesus on January 6. According to the astronomical calculations of Rick Larson, who did *The Star of Bethlehem* film we watched last year, Jesus was born in June of 2 B.C., and the Wise Men’s visit occurred on December 25 of that same year, the day Jupiter entered retrograde motion and “stopped” over Bethlehem as seen from Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

As Janet’s excellent commentary in your worship order points out, we don’t know the Wise Men’s names or who they really were. The Greek New Testament calls them μάγοι (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, 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>3</sup> And when they saw the prophesied signs appear in the heavens, they set out to investigate for themselves.

We don’t 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.

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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on January 6, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> [www.bethlehemstar.net/starry-dance/to-stop-a-star](http://www.bethlehemstar.net/starry-dance/to-stop-a-star)

<sup>3</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.

<sup>4</sup> After the Magi had found Jesus and worshiped him, God told them to go home by a different route than they had intended to follow. Finding Jesus may mean that your life must take a different direction, too. Are you willing to be led in a different way?

The idea of “epiphany” is the revealing of something—or someone—overlooked or undiscovered. A friend told me a year or so ago about an experience of this sort that he had during the greeting time at his church. After milling around and greeting folk as we sometimes 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. After all, it was the fact that, angelic visitations notwithstanding, baby Jesus did indeed seem so ordinary and unremarkable that caused the appearance of the Magi to create such a stir.

Beyond this, 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). From what little the Bible tells us about the matter, Jesus was apparently no movie star.

And 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.

The truth of the matter seems to be that God prefers small over large—small and hidden, actually.<sup>5</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 David Neff, editor of *Christianity Today*, put it, “God likes small beginnings. He likes to work in hidden ways that are easily overlooked. He loves any lost individual, even when he has 99 percent of the others safely under his care. He passionately cares for the socially unimportant whom others trample as they rush toward worldly prominence. . . .

“Small doesn’t mean ‘insignificant’ or ‘of no consequence,’” David noted. As an illustration of this principle, he wrote, “consider tapas, the small portions of intensely flavored dishes that have long served as appetizers in Spain. Over the last quarter century they have become an entire cuisine in some American restaurants.

“The first time friends invited me to a tapas restaurant, I was not intrigued. It was the 1980s, and American culture still celebrated the all-you-can-eat buffet. The idea of going to a restaurant to eat small portions didn’t seem special to me. But my first tapas bites were a revelation. An epiphany.

“The intense tastes of garlic or cumin or chilies brought such a rush of flavor that it reoriented my whole approach to eating. This was food that could not be wolfed down unthinkingly, like the 1950s American cuisine of my youth: tuna noodle casserole, Jell-O salad,

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<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 13:31-46; Luke 15.

mashed potatoes. These little dishes demanded that I nibble slowly, chew thoughtfully, and savor.

“Here is the parable of the tapas menu: God offered us something that could have been small, obscure, and forgettable. . . . His gift was the life and death (and resurrection!) of just one person in a small country repeatedly crushed and occupied by foreign powers. . . . He gives us Jesus, who died like a common criminal.

“But when we pay attention to the small thing God gives us, it changes our entire approach to life. We see the world differently. What had seemed insignificant now demands our full attention. What had seemed ordinary now seems interesting. What had seemed a dead end now promises great potential—the redemption of the whole world.”<sup>6</sup>

Like David Neff’s experience with the tapas, **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 to take. 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 eight experiences I would call epiphanies in my own life were of that sort, while the last three have been encouragements to keep steady on the path I was following.<sup>7</sup> Let me tell you about just one of them . . . .

It was October, 1990. Desert Storm was underway in Iraq, and the amphibious force to which I was assigned in the Naval Reserve 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 at the time, a full-time 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 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.”

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<sup>6</sup> David Neff, “A Perfect Pearl,” [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (12-16-08). Paul made this same point to the Corinthians when he wrote, “*Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him*” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28).

<sup>7</sup> For my own record, these eight 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; (7) when I received an email from Mike Harton in June, 2001; and (8), when I awakened at 0300 in October, 2011, overcome by anxiety and fear about our possible move to Columbia, and God led me to Jeremiah 29:11.

After that epiphany on a Thursday afternoon, 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.

But more than this, **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).

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.

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 Magi didn’t ask Jesus to do anything for them. They asked themselves what they could do for Him. I’ve told you before that on Christmas Eve, 1990, our pastor 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, essential gift without which we can bring nothing else to God.

Sometimes you and I may get the idea that we can only bring fancy stuff to Jesus—fancy stuff like the Wise Men brought. Can ordinary people bring anything to Jesus that will matter to him? Is there a place for ordinary folks in God’s plan?

The answer, of course, is that God doesn’t ask from us things that we can’t give. Jesus talked about one-talent persons as well as ten-talent persons, and He approved of the sower whose efforts were less than 100% successful.

For most of us, following Jesus is something we do in familiar surroundings and with familiar people. We live out our faith in all of the ordinary places and in doing all of the ordinary things that make up the fabric of our lives. Ordinary things become special when they grow out of our love for Jesus.

Many intense and powerful prayers are spoken while we rush to and from classes, ball games, and appointments, while we wait at traffic lights, teach in schools, stand by kitchen sinks, and struggle to remain calm amid the mounting pressures of an average day.

The gifts that you and I can bring “to the One who has everything” are indeed within our reach. You and I need to remember that the most important thing that’s going to happen this year has nothing at all to do with what we’re going to get. It has to do with what we’re going to give. And it has to do, not with what we’re going to give to our family and our friends, but with what we’re going to give to our Lord Christ. Here are a few suggestions to get your list started:

- Read the Bible.
- Talk to God.
- Tell others about God.
- Develop an intelligent, articulate, believable and sharable faith.
- Become a Giver rather than a Taker.

- Develop your convictions out of the Bible, and follow them, even when it's costly to do so.
- Demonstrate courage and steadfastness in temptation.
- Be still.
- Give back.
- Conduct your business by the Book.
- Ask God to change you instead of changing someone else.
- Set priorities for your time and follow them.
- Do things that matter.
- Give generously to the poor.
- Give sacrificially to missions.
- Learn more fully how to trust God with the frailty of physical life.
- Realize that the most valuable gift you can give to your children is a deeply Christian home in which they can be introduced to Jesus, learn to love Him, and learn to follow Him.

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>8</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>9</sup>

What gift will you bring?

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<sup>8</sup> Christina Rossetti, "In the Bleak Midwinter," 1872.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Fry.