

03 January 2021

Writings: Unexpected Gifts

The, opening their treasure chests, the wise men offered Jesus gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2:11)

When I was growing up, I got three different kinds of gifts for Christmas and birthdays: those I needed; those I wanted; and those which were totally unexpected. Gifts I needed were things like a new winter coat, or boots or a toque which found their way under the Christmas tree to make it look like I was getting a lot of gifts. Gifts I wanted were things toys, games or hockey equipment about which I had dropped plenty of hints to my parents in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Yet, almost every year, I got at least one gift which I didn't really need or want but really touched me. Some of my most favorite presents were of this type.

In today's Gospel, some wise men from the East visit Jesus in Bethlehem and present him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Bible scholars have written much about the meaning of these gifts based on the Old and New Testaments. Gold was a way to acknowledge Jesus was the King (**1 Kings 10:2**) the wise men sought when they followed the star. Frankincense was associated with the Temple Sanctuary (**Exod. 30:34**) where Priests offered sacrifice, pointing towards Christ's role as the ultimate High Priest. Myrrh was used in preparing a body for burial (**John 19:39**) and so foreshadowed Christ's sacrificial death. While the gold, frankincense and myrrh might fall into the category of expected gifts (whether needed or wanted), the wise men themselves might qualify as an expected present. There do not appear to be any Old Testament prophecies about strangers from far away arriving to visit the long-awaited Messiah. Yet, their presence adds an extra dimension to the Christmas story because it makes clear the birth of Jesus will change the future of all people regardless of their nationality or religion.

This Christmas I have also received an unexpected gift: time. I have recently learned someone who received Communion from me at a Christmas Mass has tested positive for Covid 19. Although I was wearing a mask when I gave this person Communion, the amount of time it took was minimal and I have developed no symptoms, I have been advised to self-isolate until I am able to get a Covid 19 test and the results back. This means I have a lot of time on my hands. Up until recently, I grumbled about having so much to do and so little time to think. Now that is no longer a problem.

Of course, the challenge is that my parish doesn't stop because I need to self-isolate. Funerals still need to be arranged, bills paid and mail answered. Dirty laundry still piles up, groceries need to be bought and meals prepared. Fortunately, my staff and the others in the Rectory have these things well in hand. Most of the things upon which I spend my time are no longer filling my hours.

So how do I utilize this gift of time which I have received? After three days, I am still trying to answer that question. I have resumed some projects I had been working on before my situation changed such as going through my computer files to get rid of stuff I don't really need and better organize what I keep. I have maintained my reading and prayers (but with no additional time devoted to it). Sadly, I have spent a lot of time staring at the walls trying to figure out what to do next. Since it is likely I won't get my Covid 19 results back for a week, I need to come up with a plan.

This Covid 19 pandemic has had a disruptive effect on a lot of lives, including my own. I know my challenge of trying to figure out what to do with all this extra time is nothing compared to those who have lost a loved one to the virus, work in a Long-Term Care Home or Hospital and worry about contracting it or have lost their job working in a restaurant or small business. Unexpected gifts, whether they come at Christmas or another time of the year, can also be disruptive. They may not be what we need or want but they can lead us to see things in a new way. While I would never call this pandemic a gift (unexpected or otherwise) it may prompt us to realize time is something which is limited and precious. Maybe I need to look more carefully at what I spent my time doing in the past and what I want to spend it on after we come out of this crisis. Maybe I should stop assuming I have a lot of time left to do the important things in life because Covid 19 might change everything.

Statement for Website
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When they visited Jesus, the wise men brought gifts. But they themselves may have been an even greater gift because they were not expected. Perhaps this year, we may also receive an unexpected gift which may help us cope with Covid 19.