

First Parish Church, U.C.C. Brunswick, Maine January 7, 2019

Text: Matthew 2:1-11 “Epiphanies of Gratitude” The Rev. Dr. Ron Baard

Good morning!

Followed by informal words of grace, greeting and introduction

One year, some twenty years ago, at our church’s Christmas Eve Pageant at Shepherd of the Hills, U.C.C., in Phoenix, Arizona (where our family participated) I was asked to be one of the three wise ones.

Church tradition has given these wise ones names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar.

Mary helped me with the costume; I was Melchior, and my gift to baby Jesus was gold. I remember walking down the center aisle – kneeling down – placing my gift at the foot of the manger – I was there! My heart was filled with gratitude!

This Christmas, I hope many of you were able to come to the Children’s Pageant this Christmas Eve here at First Parish Church. It was wonderful! Thank you to Dr. Jane, our Minister of Music, for your work and leadership with our children.

Many a poet has given new life to the story of the coming of the wise men. Here is a beautiful poem that recreates the story. It’s called “The Gift,” and was written by William Carlos Williams.

The story of Epiphany:

Poem: “The Gift,” by William Carlos Williams,
from *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams Volume II 1939-1962* (New Directions).

The Gift

As the wise men of old brought gifts
guided by a star
to the humble birthplace of the god of love,

the devils
as an old print shows
retreated in confusion.

What could a baby know
of gold ornaments
or frankincense and myrrh,
of priestly robes
and devout genuflections?

But the imagination
knows all stories
before they are told

and knows the truth of this one
past all defection

The rich gifts
so unsuitable for a child
though devoutly proffered,
stood for all that love can bring.

The men were old
how could they know
of a mother's needs
or a child's
appetite?

But as they kneeled
the child was fed.

They saw it
and
gave praise!

A miracle
had taken place,
hard gold to love,
a mother's milk!
before
their wondering eyes.

The ass brayed
the cattle lowed.
It was their nature.

All men by their nature give praise.
It is all
they can do.

The very devils
by their flight give praise.
What is death,
beside this?

Nothing. The wise men
came with gifts
and bowed down
to worship
this perfection.

As I have contemplated again my experience of becoming the wise one Melchior in that Christmas Pageant years ago at our church in Phoenix, I began to wonder more about who he was.

To address my question of “Who was Melchior?” I did some informal research:

St. Bede (sometimes called “the venerable Bede”) lived in medieval times, in the 8th century, and he described Melchior in his writings as “an old man with white hair and a long beard.” He described him as the oldest of the three Magi, and claimed he was King of Persia. (See https://e.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchior_Magus)

To symbolize the gratitude of the world for the Christ child, the wise men brought their Gifts of Gratitude - gold and frankincense and myrrh - and knelt in gratitude, and laid them before baby Jesus.

Again, in the words of the poet William Carlos Williams:

“The wise men came with gifts and bowed down to worship this perfection.”

The wise men came with gratitude in their hearts for the Christ child.

By following the light of the star, they came from all parts of the known world of the time – from Persia (Melchior) from India (Caspar) from Arabia (Balthazar). They came to the light of Christ, and they came to kneel before the manger, and they were filled with gratitude.

For what are you grateful? It’s the key question for Epiphany, I believe.

For Gratitude rising up within our souls and spirits is a powerful spiritual force.

It unlocks the secrets of both forgiveness and blessing.
So this is an Epiphany of Gratitude - or epiphanies of gratitude!

These epiphanies are the light of Christ welling up within us in each one of us, in you and in me.

So – I ask you again: For what are you grateful in this New Year?

Please share with your neighbor one “epiphany of gratitude” – one thing you are grateful for!

[Time for sharing in the congregation.]

Perhaps you can continue this sharing at the coffee time, and across the day with friends and family.

I am grateful for so many things – but here is one:

I am grateful for the mission and work of the Maine School of Ministry (MESOM.)

In June of 2013, after nearly 200 years, Bangor Theological Seminary closed. There was much grief over the school’s closing! I served on the faculty for ten years so I had much personal grief at its closing.

Yet, through an Epiphany of God's Spirit, another school has risen up to meet the need.

For we know persons here in Maine are still called by God to spiritual growth and renewal, and churches across Maine and northern New England, which we can call gospel communities (communities of good news) large and small across Maine, still need vibrant and Spirit led pastoral and spiritual leadership.

“The Maine School of Ministry is a leadership development program of the Maine Conference UCC established in 2013 as the successor to the Conference's Academy for Congregational Life and Leadership. The School was formed to respond to the growing need across our Conference, the region's Conferences, and our denominational partners for a regionally based, low cost, and sound program of theological education dedicated to preparing leaders for, and to supporting leaders in our churches.”

(Paraphrased from the Website for MESOM, Maine Conference, U.C.C.)

It is my joy now, and in recent months to teach a class in Pastoral Care for the Maine School of Ministry.

This morning we have some visitors with us from the Maine School of Ministry!

Will the students taking my class in pastoral care who are here this morning – please stand!

Jessie, Lindy, Becky, Sharon, Scott, Debby, and Rhonda

We welcome you!

And the Dean of the Maine School of Ministry: Rev. Bob Ross – a UCC pastor and educator – who has provided such effective leadership for this program since 2013 – could not be with us this morning because of other pastoral duties – but is here with us in the Spirit. He sends his blessings!

To our Maine School of Ministry students –

We are grateful for your presence with us today in worship!!

We support you!

We hold you in our prayers and thank you for your work.

We are grateful!

Let's close our meditation time this morning with a prayer by Edward Hays:

Let us pray:

A Psalm of Longing by Edward Hays

My Spirit hungers for your love

O Divine Maker of hearts

for the taste of your joy

and the aroma of your peace.

May this time of prayer

fill me with the whisper of your presence

and let me feel the touch of your hand upon my heart.

How I long for the depths of your love

to know your quiet constancy

the feast of your friendship that feeds me without end.

Oh, how my soul longs for you.

You elude all names we give you

and dwell beyond the grasp of brilliant minds.

Your essence pulses within every atom

yet extends beyond the frontiers of space,

unscanned by the strongest telescopes.

Awaken me to your presence, now, this moment, in my heart. Amen.

[Silence]