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Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas gifts don't always turn out the way we'd like.....

Like little Joyce who wrote, "Dear God, thanks for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy."

But sometimes the problem is with the GIVER.

After being away on business for a week before Christmas, Tom thought it would be nice to bring his wife *a little gift*.

"How about some perfume?" he asked the cosmetics clerk. She showed him a bottle costing \$50.

"That's a bit much," said Tom, so she returned with a smaller bottle for \$30.

"That's still quite a bit," Tom grouched.

Growing disgusted, the clerk brought out a tiny \$15 bottle.

Tom grew agitated, "What I mean," he said, "is I'd like to see something real cheap."

So the clerk handed him a mirror.

You may have heard this story that circulated *about a grandpa* who decided to just send checks to everyone instead of buying presents.

In each card he wrote, "Buy your own present!" and mailed them early.

He enjoyed the usual flurry of family festivities, and it was only after the holiday that he noticed that he had receiving very few cards in return.

Puzzled over this, he went into his study, intending to write a couple of his relatives and ask what had happened. It was then, as he cleared off his cluttered desk that he got his answer. Under a stack of papers, he was horrified to find the gift checks which he had forgotten to enclose with the cards.

Or what about the guy who bought his wife *a beautiful diamond ring* for Christmas?

After hearing about this extravagant gift, a friend of his said, "I thought she wanted one of those sporty four-wheel-drive vehicles."

"She did," he replied. "But where was I going to find a fake Jeep?"

While it's common to find people asking one another *what did you get for Christmas this year...* maybe even more important is the question, *what did you GIVE this year?* (and maybe considering some of these bloopers....*what were you thinking when you gave it?* Might be a good question too!)

It's a good question you know?
What gifts did you give—and not just the presents,
 but what gifts of time and energy and affection?

The gifts we give say something...about us...and about the one we love

This week on January 6th we celebrate a true gift-giving holiday,
 It's known as ***Epiphany***,
 The story of the three wise men, their journey, and their gifts
 For the baby Jesus.

Who were they, and what do their gifts say?
 Well, we don't know much about these wise men.
 We know they came from the far east
 but we don't really know ***where they came from***.

We don't even know ***how many of them were there and what kind*** of men they were! In the second century, a church father named Tertullian suggested that these men were kings because the Old Testament had predicted that kings would come to worship him. He also concluded that there were three kings based on the number of gifts mentioned, gold, frankincense and myrrh. And the manufacturers of nativity scenes caught on and so in every nativity scene, you see three kings or wise men. But the Bible doesn't tell us who they were or how many of them came.

In the sixth century, someone decided that their names were ***Melchior, Baltazar and Gaspar***. And so operas have been written ascribing these names to them. But no one really knows what their names were.

In the original manuscripts they are called the "***magi***" from an ancient Iranian word, "magoi" which was used to describe people who were captivated by astrology, spells and incantation and dressed accordingly. The Latin word is "magi" from which we get words like "magician."

So we don't know who they were, where they came from or even how many of them there were. *Why not?* Matthew probably doesn't tell us any of this information so the full emphasis will be placed on the one thing that is central to this story, namely who they came to see and what they did when they arrived.

In the *ancient church the story of the Epiphany and the wise men* was just as special as Christmas Day itself, because of its spiritual significance. From beginning to end, the story is deep with meaning. They set out following a sign from God, a special northern star. They seek the true King of the Jews, and don't stop til they find Him. And most of all—the wise men come bringing very special gifts to worship and honor God's gift, the baby Jesus.

“On entering the house,
they saw the child with Mary his mother,
and they knelt down to worship him.
Then, opening their treasure chests,
they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

The gifts themselves were very meaningful.

The *first gift, gold*, was not nearly as rare as it is today, but it was valuable and beautiful. It was used in building the temple in Jerusalem, and though it was not found in the area of Palestine, where Jesus was born, it was abundant. It's most common use was not for coins but for ornaments and jewelry. It was offered to the Son of God because it was beautiful, and it was a gift worthy of royalty, a gift for a King.

The *second gift, frankincense*, was a wonderful sweet smelling incense, something used by priests. In those days, frankincense would be used whenever a lamb was being sacrificed in the sanctuary. So the second gift offered to Jesus was a gift for a priest, and indeed he would one day offer forgiveness of sins.

Finally, the third gift of *myrrh*. *Like frankincense*, myrrh was another fragrance, usually found in the form of oil, traditionally used for embalming a body for burial, or, after being mixed with wine, it was used to medicate. It's fascinating to note that Jesus was given myrrh when he was born and

when he died, but when he died on the cross, he refused the mixture of wine and myrrh that would dampen his pain. So the third gift given to Jesus was fit for the one who would be our sacrifice.

Three gifts to worship and honor the newborn Savior.

He didn't need gold, frankincense, and myrrh,
The gifts were signs of love and honor and respect,
They were gifts of celebration and dedication from wise men who traveled
for nearly two years to find the baby Messiah.

The gifts say something about the givers and the one who received them.

These wise men did ***more than open their treasure chests.***

What they did was open their hearts to Jesus
And gave him a piece of themselves.
They traveled for years—surely against doubts and ridicule and hardship.
What they gave was a sacrifice—something expensive, valuable and
meaningful.
What they gave was a hint at what Jesus wants from us.
And what He wants---is us.

It reminds me of some of the best gifts I've ever received
Or given in my life....

Handmade certificates good for a day of fun together, handmade presents,
photo albums, vacations, working on a project together....
Gifts from the heart that last much longer than a moment.

My grandma's favorite gift is two days of time for us to sew together. My
mom loves a filled up photo album, my dad loves to get all 19 of us together
under one roof for good food and music, games and laughter.

God loves for us to serve others...to spend time in the Word...to worship
together...to pray and grow in our relationship with Jesus...to listen to the
Spirit...to use our talents...and there's countless ways we can give ourselves
to God...

So ***what will we give to God this year?***

How will we offer ourselves to the Lord—our time or talent?

How will we give of what we have and what we receive?

What will you and I give to God?

Our gifts to God say something about us.

They say that we honor and worship him...or not.

They say that we trust him with our hearts...or not.

They say that we believe in him for salvation.

You know, we are ***all like the wise men.....***

We all follow certain stars, and set out on our own journeys,

Because we are always seeking something and someone

As we make those New Year's resolutions once again,

It's the perfect time to ask ourselves,

To whom and to what will we give ourselves this year?

Where will we dedicate our time and our talent?

Where will we give our attention and affection?

Where will we give our money and resources?

What about taking this time ***to give ourselves to God?***

Wouldn't this be a good day to open your heart to God?

Isn't now precisely the right time to offer yourself to Jesus Christ
once again--as a follower, and as a friend?

To say, "Lord Jesus, my gift to you...is me."

Imagine the blessing in return!

All kinds of things can go wrong with gift giving

But everything can also go right—very right,

When we decide to ***open our hearts and give of ourselves to God***

That's a resolution worth making, a gift we all want to give, and receive,
Amen.

