

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
(First Sunday after Epiphany) Baptism of Our Lord, Year B, January 7, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen
“The Three Most Important Things”
Matthew 2:1-12, the Epiphany Gospel

the Feast of the Epiphany always falls on January 6th, which was yesterday; that marks the end of the Christmas season; the Twelfth Night after Christmas, made famous by Shakespeare, the evening of January 5th is the last day of the Christmas, and the 6th marks the beginning of the season of Epiphany which lasts until Lent

when a parish does not celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany with a service on that day, I always feel like we miss out a bit, because we don't get to focus on the Wise Men; as much as the Wise Men may seem to be a part of Christmas, their arrival signals Epiphany; so I do want us to think about the Wise Men today; and I also think that with our celebration of a Baptism today the idea of gifts being given to God, and gifts being received from God tie in closely together; we'll start off with the Wise Men and then come back to Baptism

the story of the Wise Men needs to be looked at closely, because it is easy to be misled by all of the rich visual details that are its traditional baggage, but are not found in the Bible: it doesn't say they are kings, and they couldn't all be kings from the same country anyway; they are Magi (from which we get our words “magic” and “magician”), probably from Persia, modern day Iran; they were probably priest-astrologer/astronomers of the Zoroastrian faith; there are no camels mentioned in the Bible, nor do the men have names; it doesn't even say there were three of them; we jump from the description of there being gifts of three kinds to there being three Magi; and it appears that they may have arrived in Bethlehem up to two years after Jesus' birth; getting beyond these non-Biblical trappings might help us recognize this story's more important message

notice that their gifts represent the three most important things we have to deal with in our lives: they were gifts of great value; they were given because of the Wise Men's special knowledge; and they were given in love and adoration; gold (taken to mean Jesus' kingship) can also represent our money and possessions; frankincense (taken to mean Jesus' deity) can also represent our knowledge and

intelligence; and myrrh (taken to mean Jesus' suffering and death) can also represent our love and devotion

there is not much in our lives that does not turn upon one or more of these three things: our acquiring and using of our possessions; our acquiring and using of our knowledge and intelligence; and our seeking and giving of our love and devotion; so what do the Wise Men show us about these three things?

this story reminds us that our money and our possessions are a powerful way for us to demonstrate what we value most in life; we can use our gifts to support the people, institutions, and ministries that can make a difference in the world—that are making God's difference in the world; and how we use our money and our possessions also changes us, for the better or for the worse; Jesus puts it this way (Matthew ch. 6 and Luke ch. 12) “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”; so we need to ask ourselves, where is our treasure?; where is our heart?

this story reminds us that our knowledge and intelligence are gained by being attentive to what God has to teach us; the Wise Men observe the natural world—the stars—and heed their dreams; Herod's own wise men speak from their familiarity with the wisdom of scripture; we can become wiser by asking God in prayer for guidance, and by listening, in careful silence, for God's directions; so we need to ask ourselves, do we seek God's direction?

this story reminds us that our highest love and devotion must be placed with the source of life itself, with the God who created us, with the God who shows his eternal love for us in having given us the greatest gift of all—the gift of his Son Jesus—who brought down God's love from heaven; he invites us to share in that love, to return it to God, and to share that love with those around us; so we need to ask ourselves, do we receive and share God's love?

now back to Baptism; the best overall description I can think of for Baptism is that it is God's greatest gift to us—it is God's gift of himself, in the form of the Holy Spirit, taking up residence within us, to guard us, to guide us, and to empower us; Baptism is God's promise to be with us for all of eternity

and the Baptismal liturgy gives a list of the specific spiritual gifts that each Baptized person receives: the gift of forgiveness of sin, the gift of being raised to the new life of grace, the gift of an enquiring and discerning heart, the gift of courage to will and to persevere, the gift of a spirit to know and to love God, and

the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works; it is possible for us to have some of these characteristics apart from God, but we can't have them to the fullest without the help of God's presence in our lives; that's why, as we baptize Muriel today, we all will also have the opportunity to renew our own Baptismal Covenant and be reminded of all that we are expected to do as Baptized persons

we have received much from God; so we follow the lead of the Wise Men in their example of how we should use all of the great gifts that God has given us; that's how we become wise men, wise women, wise young people, and wise children ourselves; that's how we open our treasure chests and give back to God some of what God gave us to begin with; that's how we pay homage to our Lord; that's how we give back to God some of the great gifts that God has given us in our Baptisms