

Sunday 2nd January 2022
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Matthew 25:31-46
Theme: “The Story of the 4th Wise Man”

Introduction:

Perhaps the best known verse in the whole Bible is John chapter 3, verse 16:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His One and only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life.

This verse reminds us of the Christmas message that we’ve been proclaiming and listening to: that out of love for us God sent His only Son, part of His very self, to be born as a tiny baby for us, and then to go the cross to rescue us from what we deserve for our sins, by suffering and dying for us.

Our life as one of God’s rescued children, through our baptism and our faith in Jesus as our Saviour, is one of thanksgiving and gratitude to God: *thanksgiving and gratitude to God, and to Jesus, for rescuing us from living life apart from God, both now and in eternity (cf. earning our way by good works).*

The big question, though, now is: “In this New Year of our life, how can we show our thanks to God, *and to Jesus, God’s Son*, for rescuing us?” The Wise Men, *the Magi*, brought along gifts for Jesus, God’s newborn King: gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. But what gifts can we bring for Jesus, and for our dear Father in heaven? That’s what we are going to be looking at this morning *as we begin this new year, year 2022....*

1. To help us explore this question this morning, I thought that I’d begin by telling you the story of the Fourth Wise Man. Tradition has it that there were three Wise Men. Why? Because there were three gifts given to Jesus. I want to tell

you the story of the Fourth Wise Man. It's a 'made-up' fictional story, but it is a story that reminds us, I think, of one of the main ways that we can show our gratitude to Jesus, *and to God*, for rescuing us.

The story of the Fourth Wise Man goes like this:

The name of this “Fourth Wise Man” was Artaban. He set out to follow the star, too, and he had with him a sapphire, a ruby, and a priceless pearl as gifts for the newborn King, *for Jesus*. He was riding hard to meet his friends Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar at the agreed place when he saw a figure on the ground in front of him. It was a traveller, stricken with fever.

Artaban realised that if he stopped to help, he would miss his friends. But how could he leave this man out on the road to die!? So he stopped and helped the man with food, water, and medicine. But the delay involved in helping this man meant that he didn't make the meeting point with his three friends on time. They had gone without him, leaving him a note and telling him to follow them.

The problem was, though, that to cross the desert you needed camels and supplies. His three friends had camels and supplies. But Artaban had none. He had ridden to meet his friends on his horse. So Artaban had to sell his sapphire in order to buy camels and supplies to cross the desert. This made Artaban sad, because it meant that the newborn King would never get this gem.

Artaban journeyed across the desert from the East to Israel, and after many adventures, he arrived in Bethlehem. But again, he was too late. Joseph and Mary and the baby had gone.

While he was there, though, King Herod's soldiers came to carry out King Herod's command that every child

under two years of age should be killed. The soldiers went down the streets, house by house, seizing babies and killing them. Eventually, they came to the house where Artaban was staying, a house where there was a woman with a young baby.

Artaban stood in the doorway, and with his ruby, *the second of the gifts that he was going to give to the newborn King*, he bribed the captain of the soldiers not to enter that house. The child was saved, and the mother was overjoyed. Artaban too rejoiced, but he was sad too because now the newborn King wouldn't get his ruby either.

In the years that followed, Artaban wandered all over the area of Israel, looking in vain for the King. About thirty odd years later, Artaban was in Jerusalem, and on the day that he was there, there was a crucifixion. When Artaban heard about who it was being crucified, *and about what this man had said at his trial and before his trial*, Artaban was convinced that this man, Jesus, was the King for whom he had been searching all these years. Maybe, he thought, his pearl, *which was worth an enormous amount of money*, could buy the life of the King.

But as he was hurrying up to Golgotha where Jesus was being crucified, a girl came running towards him, fleeing from a band of soldiers. "Help me", she cried out. "My father is in debt, and they're going to take me and sell me as a slave to pay the debt". Artaban hesitated for a moment, wondering what to do. Then he took out his pearl and gave it to the soldiers in payment for the girl's freedom. The girl was free, but now Artaban had nothing to give to the King.

Soon afterwards, the skies darkened and the sun disappeared (*Matt. 27:45f*). As Artaban was walking towards Golgotha with the girl, the ground rumbled from the force of an earthquake (*Matt. 27:51*). A tile fell from the roof of a house and hit Artaban on the head. He sank half-conscious to the ground. The girl pillowed his head on her lap, and she heard him mumble:

“When, Lord, did I see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did I see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did I see you sick or in prison, and visit you? For thirty odd years I’ve looked for you, and I haven’t seen your face or ministered to you, my King”.

And then like a whisper from very far away, there came a voice saying, ***“Whatever you did for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did for me”.*** And Artaban smiled as he died, because he knew that the King had received his gifts (*Story by Henry Van Dyke, entitled “The Fourth Wise Man”*).

Sure, we can’t bring precious gifts to Jesus, God’s King, and our Rescuer, *as the Wise Men did*. But we can give gifts of our time, and our energy, and our money to those around us who are hurting, or who are hungry or who are lonely, and so on. When we do that *as Jesus wants us to do*, then we are serving Jesus.

2. In my file of Christmas resources, I have a Christmas monologue from Canada. This monologue pretends to be a letter from Jesus. In this letter, Jesus says:

One nice thing about my birthday is that people give each other presents. And that’s ok, I don’t mind at all, so long as it’s bein’ done in My Name. But somethin’ that amazes me is how, on my birthday, most people give gifts to each other with never a mention of my name, except,

when they're cursin' about this and that! And to top it all off, usually the presents they give are all kinds of stuff they don't even need!

Let me ask you, wouldn't you find it kinda odd if when your birthday came along, all your friends decided to celebrate by givin' each other presents and never gave you so much as a thought.

Someone once told me, "Well, it's because you're not around like other people are, so how can we give you a present?" You oughta know my answer to that one. "Then give gifts of food and clothing to the poor, help those who need it. Go visit the lonely!". I said, "Listen, any gift that you give to your needy fellow man, I'll count as if you gave it to me personally!" A personal friend of mine, name of Matthew, he wrote that down many, many years ago.

How can we give gifts to Jesus, when he is no longer physically with us? Well, as that monologue reminds us, and as Jesus himself says in our Bible reading, we serve Jesus, *we give things to him*, when we do things for "the least important of these brothers of mine" (*Matt. 25:40*).

Who are "these brothers of mine" that Jesus is talking about here? Scholars debate whether Jesus means anyone in need, or whether the term "these brothers of mine" refers only to those who are followers of Jesus. I can't give you a definite answer to this, but what I do know from elsewhere in Jesus' teaching, *and from looking at the way that Jesus loved*, is that Jesus wants us to love *anyone* in need (*e.g., Matt. 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-37*).

The main way that we can show our gratitude to Jesus is by *doing* what he wants us to do: loving anyone in need with all that we have, *our time, our money, and our possessions*

3. Actually, I think that the three gifts of The Wise Men remind us of three of the main ways in which we can bring gifts to Jesus nowadays, *in gratitude to him for rescuing us*. This thought came to my mind when I was listening a while back to a retired pastor preaching on the passage about the Wise Men.

He followed the passage through, and tried to give a spiritual meaning to virtually everything in the passage. I think that he overdid it a bit, but he did make me stop and think about how the gifts of the Wise Men can remind us of the ways in which we can bring gifts to Jesus these days.

Take “incense”, for example. Incense was used in worship in Old Testament and New Testament times. This gift reminds us that we can show our gratitude to Jesus by worshipping him, *as we have been today*.

And the Wise Men’s gift of “myrrh”, too, reminds us of how we can give gifts to Jesus these days. Myrrh was a fragrant resin obtained from particular shrubs, and it was highly prized as a perfume. It was a spice that was used to anoint Jesus’ dead body (*John 19:39*). As such, the gift of myrrh by the Wise Men reminds us of Jesus’ death and burial.

And more than that, it reminds us that Jesus calls us to be “dead people”: people who are dead to living for self, and alive only to living for others. Remember what Jesus said:
If anyone wants to come with me, he must forget self, carry his cross, and *in this way* follow me (*Mark 8:34*).

Jesus calls us to live our life for others, and the gift of myrrh reminds us *in an indirect way* of this.

And then there’s the gift of gold by the Wise Men.... This gift reminds us that we serve Jesus by giving of our time, our

energy, *and our money* in service of others.

Nothing that we own is ours! It's all been loaned to us by God, so that we can use it in service of others. That is what we were created by God for, and that is what we have been redeemed for (*cf. TDD 29E*).

Conclusion:

As the writer of the next song that we are going to sing, the carol *What Child is this?*, puts it:

So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh;

come peasant, king, to own him;

the King of kings salvation brings;

let loving hearts enthrone him... (*SLH #746, v. 3*).

May God bless each of us *in this New Year* as we bring gifts to His Son, Jesus, *and to Him*, in grateful thanks for our salvation....