

Matthew 2:1-6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

“Christmas Clues for Clueless Givers”

Rev. Charles Schuster

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We had this debate in the Children's Sermon this morning, about what we should call the fourth candle, and we voted, the children voted, and they voted that instead of calling the fourth candle the Candle of Faith, we were going to call it the Candle of Peace, because they thought this is the year that the Candle of Peace should burn, should be lit. Now, the reason I'm telling you that is, if you look at your bulletin and the Benediction, and it will be up on the screen wrong, I expect, unless you had a chance to fix it, but the children have decided that your last response where it says "Today we light the Candle of Love, in the weeks to come we will light the Candle of Hope, the Candle of Joy, and where it says the Candle of Faith, change that, if you think about it, to the Candle of Peace. It's the best time of year. Thanks be to God. Joyce remembers how we made these editorial changes as we went along, don't you? Never quite knowing for sure what we were doing. Not a lot has changed, Joyce. Always subject to make corrections, to make it better.

Most of the time these sermons are not directed to a particular person. They are sent out in a general manner, and they hit whom they hit. Truthfully, every now and then I'll load one up and aim it, if there's a particular church member or a church committee that needs to hear the Gospel. But that's hit or miss, mostly miss. This sermon today is one that is self-directed, but I know I'm not the only one who needs to hear it. I want to help those who are without a clue become better shoppers as we approach the Christmas shopping season, and even saying that I realize that it comes a week to late for the power shoppers who were out on Friday. I saw you there. You'd been up before the sun began to shine. You hit the malls and the big box stores, looking for bargains and 70% off, and you had the look of athletes, and shopping had turned into a competitive full-body contact sport. And it's a little late for you, for this.

Two men, next-door neighbors, a decision was made. They would go sailing while their spouses went shopping. It was a small sailboat. A storm came up, the water was rough, they had trouble keeping command control of the boat. They made their way toward land, and then they hit a sandbar and stuck. Both men jumped out, they pushed, they shoved, trying to get the boat into deeper water, their legs knee-deep in water, waves beating them against the side of the boat, bruised and bloodied by the rock, cold and wet, facing

the winter wind, and Brian Bauknight tells us that one of the men turned to the other and said, "Sure beats Christmas shopping, don't it?" The sermon is for any of us who understand that story. It's for those of us who have bought our wives pierced earrings, not having noticed that the ears weren't pierced. For those of us who have thought two tickets to the ballet would be a good gift for the guy who thought Bronco tickets might be better. It's also a sermon for those of us who have lost our jobs and who don't have money to buy the gifts we wanted, to have the Christmas we hoped for. The sermon is for those of us who are looking at a clueless Christmas. A shopping list for you, a shopping list for me. Ideas for Christmas - when we shop, what do we get when Christmas day comes, what do we give? If we pay attention to the story, if we focus on the content and the context, we have to conclude it doesn't matter what we give, it really only matters how.

First of all, if we pay attention to the story, to the content of the story and the context, first of all, we realize we are called to give from the heart. To give from the heart. And if we do, we change our thinking about Christmas. I'm reminded of the story told by Emo Phillips, who said, "When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a new bicycle, and then I realized that the Lord doesn't work that way, so I stole one, and asked the Lord to forgive me." Let's make it clear to Emo, the Lord doesn't work that way either. How does God work? I think the Danish existentialist theologian Soren Kierkegaard had it about right when he told the story of the king who fell in love with a peasant woman, and he decided he didn't want her to be overwhelmed with his power, and so he disguised himself as a poor servant. The king became servant so the peasant could fall in love with a peer. Kierkegaard says that's what the word becoming flesh is about. We want God to be strong, so we can be weak. God wants to be weak so we can be strong. We want proof that God is God. God wants our freedom so that our worship is honest. Christianity does not solve all mysteries, in fact, it creates new mystery. It's not a truth that we can master, it's a truth that we can learn to serve at Christmas, at Good Friday. It's all about love, where God doesn't give us an answer, God gives it all. A gift of love for us. It's a foolish idea, and a wonderful idea.

Christmas gift giving isn't about gifts, it's about the giver who gives from the heart. The Magi. William Sydney Porter was a banker and a swindler and a thief, and he embezzled money from the bank, and they put him in prison, and he changed his name. Because if you're William Sydney Porter, indicted for embezzlement, in prison, and you write a story you want somebody to read, you change your name. Henry, he called himself. O. Henry. "The Gift of the Magi." Della and Jim. A buck eighty-seven is all they had, pennies in a piggy bank. The day before Christmas. She had beautiful hair, admired the matched set of hairbrushes. Jim sold his watch band to buy her brushes for her hair, and told her he had lost the watchband. She went to town and had them cut off her hair and sold it and bought Jim a new watchband. She, who had no hair, was being given hairbrushes by him, who had no watchband. She, who was being given hairbrushes for her hair, used her hair to buy him the watchband he sold. As I said before, if I had a board up here, I could chalk that up for you. It's complex. But this isn't complex. O. Henry concludes "The Gift of the Magi," "Here I have related to you an uneventful chronicle of two foolish children. They unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasure of their houses, and in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give

gifts, these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest, they are Magi, Magi that gave from the heart." When we give from the heart, our gifts are always good, and we are Magi, wise.

There was a man who gave another man a kiss on Christmas Day, and it was the best gift the man ever received, a kiss from another man. The year is 1979, Christmas. The pastor of the church was invited to go to Iran. There were American hostages. Angry Iranians had stormed the American embassy, hostages were taken. Bill Coffin, pastor of Riverside Church, was invited to be with the hostages and serve them Communion, but before he left, at the airport, Barbara Rosen and her son spoke to Bill, and she said, to the small child, "Kiss Reverend Coffin, and he will kiss Daddy for you." Alex gave him a big wet kiss. It melted Bill's knees. Twelve hours later, 8,000 miles away, he met Barry Rosen. Barry looked downcast and defeated. Bill said to him, "I've come all the way from America to give you a kiss from Alexander." And it was like the Christmas tree at the White House. Lights were turned on, suddenly, in this man's head. Bill said, "Never have I seen such illumination. Needless to say, I brought some kisses back." When Barry Rosen was released with the others, he will never forget that Christmas gift, a kiss from Alex delivered by Bill, a gift from the heart.

When we give from the heart, love comes down at Christmas and the word becomes flesh and it dwells among us, and we will know what to give if we give from the heart. We can give without loving. Loveless gifts are obligatory. But we cannot love without giving, for the heart has its way of knowing what to give and how, and it's not on the basis of the price tag, to impress, it comes from the place where the word originally came before it dwelt among us. We give from the heart. Secondly, we give to the future. A gift to the future. Eleanor Powell said it, "What we are is God's gift to us. What we become is our gift to God." We give to the future. It's our gift to God. The gift of the magi, by Matthew, in the second chapter of the Gospel. Some believe, and I'm one of them, that the wise men in this story came to the Christ child when the child in the story was two years old. There are reasons, if you read the story, to believe that. Their gifts were strange. Gold, frankincense, myrrh. Odd gifts for a child. What would a child do with gold? You give a child of two gold? No, you give a child of two a toy. And frankincense, some mind-altering drug. You give that to a child of two? I don't think so. You give a child, if you want to alter their mind, a book to challenge their mind. And myrrh. You give a child of two a spice that preserves dead bodies? I don't think so. You give a child of two a gift of life, not the gift of death. But you see, the wise men gave to the future. Gold was a symbol of wealth, the richness of his life as it was to be. Frankincense was the symbol of wisdom. The deep spiritual insight he would bring to the world in the future. Myrrh was the symbol of the defeat of death, the resurrection that would put death itself in perspective, and be a signature to his life and all who believe in him. The Wise Men gave to the future.

I think Magi always give to the future, and sometimes their gifts are not understood. Gandhi, for example, Gandhi gave to the future. His hope and the giving of his life was to a future where there would be no class society, where a person would not be judged by the color of their skin. That was Gandhi's mission, and he confronted the British

government, and he won. Or did he? Jim Wallace was on a flight across the ocean on British Airways a few years ago. They announced that the in-flight movie would be *Marley and Me*, and Wallace asked, "Is that the only one?" and the flight attendant said, "We're also showing the movie *Gandhi*." "Where do I have to sit to see that?" "I'm sorry, sir, but *Gandhi* is only being shown in first class." The man who gave his life for the future where there would be no class system is being shown in first class only. What an irony. We give to the future. We give to the future. Sometimes we don't know where it's going to go. Fred Craddock is such an influence on preachers, teaching homiletics, teaching at Candler School of Theology, one of the best preachers in the country. We've got to have him out here, he's just wonderful. I've gotten to hear him three times. He's a tremendous preacher, I think one of the best. One of the best. He's recently written a book, and the title of his book is *Reflections on My Call to Preach*. He writes about his Sunday School teacher. Her name is Jane Nelson. He tells us, "I'm the product of the Sunday School at Central Avenue Christian Church in Humboldt, Tennessee." Anybody from Humboldt, Tennessee? "It was in Sunday School that I first encountered Christian community, and it was there that I first understood that there were people beyond my family who cared for me, and encouraged me, and in fact led me through the Bible and connected it in an almost narrative way. Miss Jane was my teacher. The classroom was full of pictures of Jesus and other characters in the Bible. I thought they were actual photographs of Jesus holding children on his lap, of Jesus healing the sick, of Jesus feeding the hungry, of Jesus teaching people, of Jesus stilling the storm, of Jesus walking on water. I was becoming attached to Jesus in ways at that time, I did not fully understand. It was a sad day when Miss Jane told us that she was getting married and moving away, a sad day. She was moving to Mississippi and her name would no longer be Jane Nelson, but Jane Manning." By the way, Miss Jane's grandson was in Denver this week. She married Archie. Archie had two sons who, had three sons, but two of them you may know - Peyton and Eli. Eli was the quarterback for the New York Giants Thursday night here. Too bad. His grandmother's gift was a gift to the future, and she, I'm sure, has no idea how her gift was received and how far that gift has been given. She influenced one of the greatest preachers of all time. You see, we just never know.

Robert Fulgham remembers one day in November when he approached a flower stand in his neighborhood. Buckets of tulips on the sidewalk, in a stand, bowls of budding daffodils and narcissus available. "What is this," he said to the woman who was selling them, "spring? It's November. It's autumn, it's fall, it's Advent, it's cold. Selling tulips and daffodils has to be illegal or immoral or just plain wrong. Whose idea was this?" At about that time a shaky old man walked up to the stand. He hung his cane on the counter's edge. He picked up a bowl of almost-blooming daffodils and said he'd like to have them gift-wrapped. And he looked at Fulgham and said, "My wife of 57 years is dying in the hospital. She's 90. She's got a couple of weeks at best, a few days at worst. Last night she said she was sad that she would not live long enough to see one more spring. She's a gardener, she loves flowers, she loves spring. Wonderful to find these daffodils. Now I can give her spring for Christmas." An old man was giving to the future to a wife who would never see it, but will before her death be part of it. That's the reason Christmas was put at the darkest time of year. The church selected the date to celebrate Jesus' birth because the church, centuries ago, wanted us to give to the future, to know that in the

dark and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be. Or in the days of doubt and chaos there's the rumble of a new and better day, or in the confusion of what we know, there is potential we hardly imagine. Give to the future, and if there is death, give to the memory, moving from grief to gratitude. And if there is a child without purpose in his or her life, imagine a life set ablaze and invest in a talent that's just beginning to bud so that it may bloom, and give to the future. Thoughtful wishing, Forrester Church called it, thoughtful wishing, unlike wishful thinking, often comes true. Give to the future. A poem to a poet. A telescope for a gazer of stars. A compliment for an insecure spirit. A promise of time well spent in advance to a lonely soul. Give to the future. Give from the heart.

Jean Robinson and her husband Jerry were watching football, a game on television, and a commercial came on, and the announcer said, "Men think about women every 5.3 seconds," and then he went on to advertise soap. She looked over at Jerry and he was just staring at the set, and she asked, "Do you do that?" and his response was probably typical of most of us here, males, he looked at her and said, "Do what?" She said, "Do you do what that man said, you're looking right at it." He said, "Well, I'll be honest with you, I was looking at the TV but I really wasn't paying attention. The reason there's a time-out is, that it's fourth down and three to go, and the coach has to either go for a first down or kick a field goal and go for an onside kick and time is running out and I was just sitting here trying to figure out what the coach ought to do." "Oh," Jean thought. "Men think about women every 5.3 seconds." And then she thought, "One thousand one, one thousand two, three, four, five point three. And she said, "So you're not thinking about women." And he said, "I'm thinking about winning. I think he ought to go for it."

To the shoppers who are preoccupied with football, life, trivia, work, or worry, time is running out. It's time to get a clue. Give from the heart, give for the future. I think we ought to go for it.