

Sermon, Feast of the Epiphany, 1/6/2024, St. David's Matthew 2:1-12 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Not quite two weeks ago we were gathered in this place on Christmas Eve, with a lot more people than we have tonight. We heard the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke, from the annunciation to Mary in the morning and then the actual birth and the annunciation to the shepherds.

We don't have angels announcing things in tonight's story. We don't know how the magi found out about Jesus. We don't even really know what magi means, although this translation uses "wise men." Were they kings? They were definitely foreigners, probably important ones, and wealthy, because they had extravagant gifts. They were also sort of strange gifts for a baby. Now I say this as someone who has given strange gifts to babies. I gave my great-niece a ukulele when she was baptized at seven months old. It was white, so that seemed appropriate to me for a baptism; but still, she was a baby. Or a little over a year ago I had a book signed for Jude Criner, who was then two months old. It wasn't a children's book—it was a novel called *Lark Ascending* and it was by Silas House so I decided it would be lovely for Jude to own because his middle name was Silas. His parents were very kind about the book, but I am sure they thought it was kind of inappropriate for an infant.

But ukuleles and novels, honestly, don't compare to gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What's a baby going to do with gold? Or incense? Or myrrh?

What makes a gift inappropriate anyway? Let's start with gold: according to the Gospel of Luke, the family was away from home for the birth, so gold would be heavy to haul back along with a baby. And incense certainly seems a strange gift, although if the family was packed in with animals perhaps some smoked frankincense would make everything smell fancy. And myrrh: that was used to anoint dead bodies. Why would someone give that to a *baby*? That's not very hopeful at the beginning of a life.

Then again: the Bible tells us that the holy family fled the Egypt shortly after they received these gifts, and perhaps the gold enabled them to do so. The frankincense and myrrh could have been used decades later to anoint the body of Jesus. So maybe these gifts weren't so inappropriate after all. Or maybe inappropriate gifts are some of the best ones.

We're leaving a season of gift giving. How do you go about selecting gifts? Some people make it easy, registering on Amazon. People do that for wedding and baby showers too. You know that you will be getting the recipient something they want and that no one else has yet procured (unless they buy it from a different merchant).

When Gary and I were married some twenty-seven years ago I registered for china and silver. Gifts were sent to our new home in Virginia, where Gary opened them while I was in Arizona noting everything so I could write thank-you notes from there. I remember one gift in particular: two soup spoons. Gary read the name of the person and said "two spoons. Who would give us two spoons?"

I said "Well they're sterling, so are \$50 each. That's a really generous gift."

He immediately said “NO. I am NOT EATING FROM A FIFTY DOLLAR SPOON. We need to send it back!”

I said “Too late. Read the next gift.”

I still have those two spoons, and we use them perhaps one a year. Gary may still think they were an inappropriate gift, but they were on our list in the pattern I selected so I certainly did not. But what I remember most about those spoons was his reaction and how funny I thought it was. One of my favorite wedding gifts was not on my list at all: a pitcher with E, G, and F engraved on it. It was the first time I had seen our initials together like that and I cried. I loved it so much, and still do. But it’s crystal and skinny and impractical so I never actually use it. But I love it, and always remember how I felt seeing our initials together for the first time.

One of my favorite inappropriate gifts.

Do you have a favorite inappropriate gift?

Back in May, I was adjusting to my new targeted therapy medicine. I lost ten pounds in two weeks. People tried hard to bring me appropriate gifts, like tapioca or other things they hoped I could eat. Nothing was working.

My niece, her husband and two children were visiting. One of my anti-nausea tricks was sniffing an alcohol wipe. I learned this from an oncology nurse in the hospital. I was trying to pretend everything was fine while sniffing this thing every few minutes. No one knew what to do.

My five-year-old great niece—the one who got a white ukulele from me in honor of her baptism when she was seven months old—brought me some paper and crayons and ordered me to draw with her. I did it because how could I say no to such an amazing princess? We drew pictures of books because we both love them. Then she went on to another activity but left some crayons and paper with me, to my amusement.

Then I realized one of the crayons she had left for me was a glitter crayon. Those were her favorite. She loves anything that sparkles. That was perhaps my favorite inappropriate gift of all time. And like those inappropriate gifts of the magi, it turned out to be useful. I was so touched that I forgot, for a few seconds anyway, how nauseous I was.

Gifts can be a light for us, a sign of wonders to come. Tonight is the feast of the Epiphany, the start of a season of light and signs and wonders that we will celebrate until Ash Wednesday. What was one of your favorite gifts, even if at the time it seemed inappropriate? What gift can you give to others, even if they think you are crazy at first?