

# Sermon: “What Can I Give Him?”

*Matthew 2:1-12*

Julie R. Harley – January 1, 2012 – First United Church of Oak Park

No Christmas season is complete without watching at least one of the classic Christmas movies: Dickens’ “Christmas Carol” written in 1843 and still going strong; “Holiday Inn” and “White Christmas” from the ‘40s and ‘50s, and “It’s a Wonderful Life” with Jimmy Stewart from 1946.

They’re all romantic, inspiring stories of overcoming conflicts and discovering the true meaning of Christmas: finding abundance in a world of scarcity.

In the ‘60s we gained two other gems: “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” in which the Peanuts gang are surrounded by a sea of commercialism and Charlie Brown manages to keep it real; and “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” where the Grinch learns that Christmas can come without ribbons, it can come without tags, it can come without packages, boxes or bags. These movies were signs that prosperity was eroding the reason for the season.

And in the last 20 years, I’ve noticed that the Christmas classics are no longer sentimental – they’re comedies. We’ve got “A Christmas Story” starring Ralphie and his quest for a Red Ryder BB gun, filmed in 1983, and “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation” starring Chevy Chase from 1989.

Clark Griswold hauls his whole family to choose the perfect Christmas tree, and after endless pratfalls, he finally finds it – only to discover he forgot to bring a saw to cut it down. Clark hangs the perfect Christmas lights that cover every inch of his house, and then manages to blow all the fuses.

There is a huge gap between our Christmas dreams and the mundane reality of our actual lives.

Like Clark Griswold, we try every year to create the perfect Christmas – and then our plans are disrupted by our totally crazy relatives. Like Ralphie, we pin our hopes on the gift that will fulfill every desire – only to learn that a BB gun really can shoot your eye out.

So here we are on this New Year’s Day – the seventh day of the 12 days of Christmas – telling the story of the Magi from Matthew’s gospel. Their journey to the manger is a comedy too.

The Magi were eminent, powerful, wealthy men – scientists and intellectuals. They traveled to Bethlehem from the East, perhaps Iran, Iraq or Arabia.

And yet . . . they were clueless, overdressed and late to the party!

For one thing, they were following a star, which not a very specific directional sign. Garrison Keillor says: *“They followed a star to the stable, which, for Wise Men, is not particularly smart when you stop and think about it, because a star is in the sky*

*and the sense of direction you get from it is pretty general, and which stable the star is over depends a lot on where you are standing – so they were navigating by faith.*

*They made a long trip based on less hard information than a person might like to have, but they came through to that first and perfect Christmas. And so may we. (From “The True Meaning of Christmas,” in *Life Among the Lutherans*.)*

They didn't know a thing about politics or religion. They arrived in Jerusalem, rather than Bethlehem and got tangled up with Herod and his advisors, who consulted the prophet Micah and told them to head 9 miles south.

Jesus was born in a cave, where animals were kept. The reason he wasn't born in the inn is that homes in that time had only one room. If a pregnant woman arrived, ready to give birth, she would have no privacy in the inn. So the innkeepers directed Mary and Joseph to the hollowed out rocky cave beneath the house where the animals lived and food was stored. There Mary could give birth without lots of people standing around and watching.

The gifts they brought were not age-appropriate. I went to a baby shower for Pastor Leah, and we gave Leah and Chris lots of bibs, toys, blankets and onesies. The Magi brought gifts that were in a whole different league: gold, frankincense and myrrh to symbolize Jesus' majesty, divinity and coming suffering and death. It seems comic to us that this is what they presented to a 2-year-old child, who has no need for those things.

They arrived two years after Jesus was born, probably because that is how long it took for their journey.

**The good news of Epiphany is that no matter what we do to distort this season, no matter how many times we make it into a comedy or even a farce, Christmas still comes.**

That is the truth about Christmas. We ask God for many things, treating God like a big Santa Claus in the sky. But God has nothing to give at all except **to dwell among us.**

Christmas is simply about receiving this gift: Emmanuel, God is with us.

We don't earn this gift, deserve it, win it, buy it, or do anything to be worthy of receiving it. God's love does not depend on whether we're naughty or nice.

God's love simply IS, in spite of what we do or do not do. God is very, very fond of us. God so loved the world, in fact, that God gave God's only Son to us. As a gift.

The Magi went on a long journey. They took wrong turns. They brought inappropriate gifts. They unknowingly set into motion a huge **industry** of gift-giving.

And we do the same thing every year. Yet when we come to the end of the parties and presents, the food and festivities, the Black Friday sales and the Cyber Monday specials and the After-Christmas Big Big Discounts, we realize this one thing:

**God is with us.**

I know this is what ministers are supposed to say, but I have come to the point in my life where I really believe it.

When the Magi received God's gift, they were changed. They were never the same. The wonderful last verse of today's text says, "They left for their own country by another road."

When we receive God's gift of vulnerable love and graceful presence, we are transformed. We can re-evaluate the gifts we give and to whom we give them.

For most of my life, there has been a voice in my head that says Christmas is about getting **what I want**.

Maybe it started with that perfect Christmas when I was 10 and got the Betty Crocker EZ Bake Oven. Every year when I asked the kids to make their Christmas lists, I made my list too. Maybe I didn't admit it on the outside, but on the inside I always thought that the quality and quantity of my gifts would prove my worth as a person.

Sure, I know Christmas is not MY birthday. But it always felt like it.

When I was no longer a child and became an adult, Christmas took on other meanings – all the gifts I was expected to give out of obligation or guilt or social expectation or because I was motivated to get a tax deduction. In the end, I realized all those gifts were still about me . . . and how people would feel about me.

Sure, as a Christian, I had read books about "Unplugging the Christmas Machine" and "Having a \$100 Holiday," but I didn't really believe there was an alternative to what I had always done.

This year I decided it was time to change my ways. I started the season of Advent by thinking about what I most value. And then I thought about how my gift-giving could reflect those values. It was pretty convenient that the Alternative Christmas Store was set up every Sunday in the lounge.

The average American adult last Christmas spent \$830 per person on food, decorations and presents. So I decided to see if I could spend most of my \$830 on gifts to the church and our mission partners.

I asked myself how I could give gifts to Jesus, gifts that came from my heart. So my friends and family got a lot less candles and candy and calendars . . . and Christmas still came. And our Alternative Christmas Store delivered about \$14,000 in gifts to Jesus.

Yes, I know, we will always give the obligatory gifts: tips to the hairdresser and the newspaper delivery person; boxes of goodies that advertise our business; gratitude gifts to teachers and neighbors.

And I know we will always give gifts that are symbolic – not because the people we love really need anything, but simply as a way of saying, "You are a gift of God in my life."

But perhaps the greatest gifts are those that transform people's lives.

The real story behind Santa Claus began with St. Nicholas, who was a bishop in Turkey. Some say that he learned a poor man in his community was prepared to sell his three young daughters into prostitution because he could not afford a dowry for them to be married. When St. Nicholas discovered this, he anonymously threw three bags of gold through the man's window, saving the girls from a life of slavery.

The generosity of St. Nicholas to children came from his desire to protect those who are poor and vulnerable, not to give gifts to reward good little girls and boys.

This is what happens when God breaks in to our world.

Christmas re-orientes us, from believing the world revolves around our wishes, needs and desires, to the epiphany that **everything we have is a gift . . .** and our purpose is to share the gift. Henry Van Dyke said this is how we keep Christmas: *Are you willing to forget what you have done for other people, and remember what other people have done for you?*

*To ignore what the world owes you, and think about what you owe the world?*

*To put your rights in the background and your duties in the foreground?*

*To own that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give life.*

*To close your book of complaints against the management of the universe, and look around you for a place here you can sow a few seeds of happiness.*

*Are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.*

Scrooge learns to be kind, if only for a day. George Bailey learns that life is worth living, and goes back home to the hardships of raising a family – with hope in his heart. Bing Crosby puts on a show and saves the Inn. The Grinch holds hands and sings with all the Who's in Whoville. Ralphie and his family eat Christmas dinner at a Chinese restaurant and they are happy, despite all the irritation they have inflicted upon one another.

This is the truth at the heart of every classic Christmas story: God's generosity changes us, little by little. Christ is born, the Magi arrive . . . even if they are a little late and nine miles off. No matter how much we have messed things up, Christmas comes every year.

What a gift. Amen.