

**“Be Careful What You Pray For...  
You Just Might Get It”**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury  
**January 4, 2015**

**READINGS:** Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

Today is the Sunday closest to Epiphany – the end of the Christmas season and the culmination of the 12 days of Christmas.

We associate the Wise Men to this event (Wise Ones to be more politically correct, or Magi if we want to simply bring into English letters the Greek name for these individuals).

It seems titles and labels have become less and less meaningful as we move into the future.

But these scholars-astrologists-magicians-wisdom seekers did bring gifts to the baby Jesus, and some say that is why we bring gifts to one another to this day. And the nature of their gifts may determine the nature of our gift giving – valuable like gold, or practical like frankincense and myrrh.

Often our gift giving is preceded by expressed wishes for Christmas, even prayers for what we want. Years ago my one daughter wanted a Volkswagen for Christmas. “That’s all I want dad.” So being a loving parents she got one – a 1/36 scale Volkswagen in its own box.

When asked “What would you pray for if you could pray for anything,” a group of children of a variety of ages offered their most sought after desire.

You may be surprised at the results. Yes, there were prayers for “all the video games in the world” and “money – lots of it” and a “bike” and “hockey net,” but even more prayed for “health” and “peace.” Even specific prayers for self were to “have a god life” and to “have lots of friends” and “pray that my grandmother to get better from cancer.”

Some people saw their dreams fulfilled in Christmas gifts this year, but we hear again and again those who prayed for a puppy and got it, but by now, not 10 days later, wonder what to do with the animal.

We all have moments when we have prayed for something, got it, and wondered why that happened, or how could it end up so differently than we imagined.

The story of the Magi was a story of going to pay tribute to a special child, but their journey was far from ordinary and wonderful. Their very safety was threatened.

I had that experience of a sort when in Bethlehem in 2007. I had seen the crowds, and knew the power of attraction of the Church of the Nativity, and really had little interest to go there, as heretical as that may sound from a minister in the season of Christmas. But I am not a hands-on kind of person. I would have made a great chemist if I did not need to do experiments – I liked the theory and the various interactions others had discovered and written about – I did not need to do the experiments to prove the theory.

Bethlehem is a mob of people, even 5 weeks before the season of Christmas as I learned in 2007. Almost pinned amidst the aggressive street salespeople, I was throwing money to buy items I had no interest in simply to get away. And then a fellow I had seen three hours earlier tracked me to the bus I was riding. He yelled that I had not bought jewellery from him, but did from someone else, and demanded I buy two necklaces from him. I got onto the bus just in

time, but he kept pounding the outside of the window where I sat. The only good thing in this whole experience? My staff in Toronto did appreciate, for the most part, the rosary beads I bought each one made of olive wood. Somehow I ended up with 12 of them in my haste to get away.

We may pray for a certain experience, and then face uncertainty and fear when we get there. No one seeks to be on a plane that crashes in the ocean, or a bus that rolls over a cliff, yet we often dream of opportunities to visit remote places where the risks and dangers are real. No one sees the holy land as a place of peace, but surely in the holy sights of Bethlehem there would be peace and goodwill. Sadly, that is not the case – in our day or in the time of the Magi.

But the basic question to ask today, in light of the Magi who went to witness the birth of the promised one, is this: “What are you praying for in this new year of 2015? How has Christmas impacted you to see new opportunity in the face of whatever uncertainties and fears you may have?”

A few years ago Mariah Carey wrote a song that comes as close to a hymn in popular music as anyone has done: Entitled “Lord, I pray,” it begins as follows:

“Lord, I pray that in my lifetime there will come a day when the world will wake up with unclouded eyes and there’ll be no need to cry. Won’t you bring that dream to life?”

As believers we know that God does not magically make things happen. But we have a role in bringing the Christmas message to reality in our time and in our place. Whatever you pray for this day and into the new year, may you be prepared to live up to all that you pray for, and may you have the strength and the wisdom to handle what comes your way, because you just might find your prayers fulfilled.