

“I Can Use Anything at All...But I Don’t Need That!”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
For Epiphany Sunday January 3, 2016 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

When it comes to receiving, or even requesting, gifts, most of us are quite amenable to whatever comes our way. Just the idea of being remembered and receiving a token of someone’s thanks, appreciation, love, encouragement, friendship, and support is a highlight for any person’s life. We get less and less picky as we age, other than we may feel we have enough “stuff” and appreciate kind gestures, or gifts cards that provide service or meals rather than something else to put in the cupboard or fill the shelves.

Yet no matter how understanding and cooperative we are, we may have joined the lines of the post-Christmas shoppers to exchange something that did not fit, or change clothing where the colour did not work, or return a gift that simply was not as special as it seemed lying under the tree in its wrapping paper before Christmas.

Years ago the entertainer Meatloaf recorded a song “I will do anything for love – but I won’t do that.” It was the story of boundaries and appropriate actions in life:

“as long as the planets are turning,
As long as the stars are burning
As long as dreams are coming true.
You’d better believe it, that I would do.”

Now I am cautious to ever say to a friend or family member: “I can use anything at all, but I don’t need that,” because often even things I think I do not need often become useful and helpful eventually.

I often have wondered if Mary wanted to blurt out to the visiting Magi “I can use anything at all, but I don’t need that.” After all, for anyone who has had a new baby, and been in a land where you have no place to stay and no food to eat, how helpful would it be to receive gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

Now gifts need not be large and expensive, but they need to have a purpose and simple value. For many years I said the best wedding gift we received was a small casserole dish, that no doubt was purchased for far less than \$5 at the time, but it was perfect for two people. Many of the gifts were great gifts for a family, and eventually became important items to make meals for a family of four, or even a family expanded to five or six with friends staying for a meal. But for two people? Too large for our needs, too big for a modest meal students make, and too large for the small apartment size stove and cupboards in student housing.

Maybe it was the unique gifts, the long journey, the unique presentation of the magi, but as a child I always had difficulty understanding who these eastern visitors were.

Who is a wise man, or as we might ask today, a wise or insightful one?

Those known as magi were unique individuals. They combined religious insight with philosophical understanding and political acumen. They were seen as Zoroastrian priests and also like magicians or sorcerers.

Often with terms that have connections to the occult, definitions get as widespread as people want to make them. They have spawned works such as Morton Smith’s *Jesus the Magician* (who argues that Jesus was

seen as being like a magician in some early church quarters) and the iconic presentation of Pierre Trudeau by the long-time Toronto Star columnist Richard Gwyn in a book entitled *The Northern Magus*.

Priests and prophets of the Old Testament tradition often had both a religious role and a political role. The religious role of the priests was within the temple tradition but also they were to make holy actions of the community. The prophets had a role to call the community back to justice and fairness for all, yet also advised the kings and rulers as to how they should carry out their duties.

We have lost that sense today. So much so that any advice from religious people or religious leaders to the government of the day is seen as religious meddling and interfering, and any desire to provide a prophetic voice is seen as being political, not religious.

If we are squeamish about the role of the prophet and priest in today's society, why do we accept without question, or at least with little reflection, the role of the Magi in the story of Christ?

They came after all to see the one who was to become the "king of the Jews." Their understanding of the role of a religious leader was defined by their cultural tradition, and so Jesus from the start was seen as much as a political ruler as a religious leader. Jesus spent the rest of his life trying to live down that assumption, but it was a cultural assumption imbedded in the time.

Another interesting observation is the Magi were "overjoyed" once they found the star and its location that was leading them. They were not overjoyed at getting to Jesus' place of birth, but overjoyed at finding the star and knowing they were on the right track.

I never really heard those words in that way before, and I thought there is good reason for this story to be at Epiphany, and so near the start of a new year.

We live in a time where the goal is to get to the end – to accomplish what we set out to do. We are rarely happy unless things turn out the way that they should turn out in our mind.

Maybe we need to hear anew this story, where joy comes when we are clear about the direction to take, the goal to seek, and the results that we desire.

We may not always accomplish everything we set out to do, but setting out on the pathway to do what is important is enough to bring joy and happiness into one's life.

ED Kruse of Healthierchurch.org, a company out of Chicago that works with congregations in developing transformational leadership and wholeness within the community, has offered his New Year's list for members of the organization to ponder. They could be seen as the spiritual gifts he presents to associates (and through associates to churches) that are worth pondering this Epiphany season.

Let me offer four of them (they are put in the first person so the person reading them relates to them in a personal way):

- a) If I set my goals knowing that I could not fail, what would my top two goals for 2016 be?
- b) Are my passions and my spiritual gifts being fulfilled in what I am doing?
- c) What one habit would I like to replace with a different habit?
- d) What one practice would help me to draw closer to Jesus Christ in the year ahead?

Epiphany – the time when Magi appear to Jesus, a star appeared to them, and we, in turn, hope for the appearance of insight and truth from God for our own lives. May we ponder how that may be so in the weeks and months ahead.

May we know that we, too, are being led into the future – and rejoice at the opportunities that are placed before us in this year 2016.