

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: December 24, 2020
Sermon: "Christmas Presents"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Litany: "What if?"

Leader: What if it all happened?
People: What if God came down
in a little baby, in a tiny village
in a humble stable, in a poor family
long, long ago, far, far away?

Leader: What if shepherds really were watching their flocks by night
and angels really did sing
of good news
of great joy
for all people
loud and clear?

People: What if
a star did wander the skies
and caught the Wise Men's eyes
who followed the star
and found the baby
and gave their gifts?

Leader: What if it all happened
really, really happened
and we believed
really, really believed
the prophecy, the miracle, the purpose, the person?

Together: What if we spent a full year—all of 2021—
living each moment as if we believed today!

The challenge of Christmas for every family with even a hint of Christian faith is what to do about presents. How to keep presents from taking over Christmas. All that gift giving, gift receiving, gift shopping, gift expectations—it's all too much!

It all begins innocently enough. Little kids are all excited for Christmas, knowing that presents are coming. Families build up whole rituals for hiding presents, wrapping, laying out cookies for Santa, hanging stockings—all in anticipation of presents.

Then more rituals for Christmas morning. The eternal agony for the first child up, staring at the presents, waiting for everyone else to get up, then going through everyone's stocking, piece by piece, till finally, the tree. Each present opened, noted, praised, put aside for the next, and the next.

Truth is, there are about 12 years or so when it's fun to shop for excited kids, imagining their surprise and delight. By teenage years, it's a bit more . . . oh, what shall I call it, a bit more "fraught . . . iffy"

In our world, America, 21st century, Christmas presents have taken over Christmas. All the trappings of Christmas begin right after Halloween; all the enticements to go shopping begin right after Thanksgiving. Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday—a million catalogs in your mailbox, all focusing on . . . presents.

How the heck did that happen? Well, blame it on the Bible! Those Wise People from the East, those alert astronomers who followed that Star to Bethlehem, those Magi traveled all that way—to give presents! And here's something funny. Nobody remembers their names! Not a one. But we sure remember their presents! Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh. For a newborn baby!

What were they thinking? Well, Christians have tried to figure that out for centuries, and there is a standard answer. The Wise Men were looking for the new "King of the Jews," they said, and gold was always the perfect gift for a king. Frankincense and myrrh are both oils, frankincense often used to make incense. And incense has always been associated with God and worship.

Even in the Bible, our prayers and praise are said to be sweet-smelling incense rising up to God. So the frankincense is for Jesus's divinity. And myrrh was often used as a burial oil, maybe anticipating Jesus's death on the cross. O.K., all that makes sense.

My guess is more mundane. The Wise Men set out on an unknown adventure to an unknown destination to honor an unknown special person. Someone probably said, "Gee, we need some gifts, but we don't know anything about them!" But everybody loves gold, and who doesn't love good perfume?

Any of you who have stood next to me know that I am an olfactory person. That means I love smells. I love perfume and cologne. And for those of you still

wondering what to get me for Christmas, it's never too late. I use Z Zegna and Zegna Integrity Cologne, two out-of-production, hard-to-find colognes. But I find them. You can too! *Z Zegna!*

Anyway, back to my sermon! Frankincense and myrrh are both essential oils, one popular in incense, the other in perfume; ancient remedies, and both good for what ails you.

There are two sides to every present. The giver and the receiver. And the key to both is sincerity. The intent of the giver. The gratitude of the receiver. Both should be sincere. Not "Does it fit?" "Is it my color?" "Would I ever use that?" "What is that?!" It should be this simple: "Here, this is for you!" "Gee, thanks!"

You'll remember what Shakespeare said about giving. He was talking about giving the gift of mercy, but it applies to every gift: the giver is "twice blessed. It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

The Wise Men were wise enough to know that. They were blessed to give. They hoped the Baby Jesus would be blessed by their gift. And there's nothing wrong with "re-gifting." My guess is that's what happened, sort of, with the gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You know what happened to Jesus after Christmas? They had to escape to Egypt, for three years! They fled for their lives from a murderous, evil king, on the run from the law, living as refugees, illegal aliens in Egypt. Expensive perfume, top-quality incense, both medicinal oils, plus gold pieces—that all came in handy, re-gifted, or bartered or sold for food, security, shelter.

I don't think Mary smelled that perfume, turned up her nose, and said, "That's not my brand." I don't think Joseph said that incense made him allergic. I don't think either of them said, "Gold is too heavy to carry, can't we just have a check?"

As for Jesus, barely a week old, he thought the gold was shiny and pretty, and he wiggled his nose at the oils that smelled so good. But above all, I'll bet he smiled at the Wise Men. You know, some people say new babies don't really smile, that it's just gas. But anyone who has ever held a baby knows the truth. Yes, babies smile, even Jesus. And not because he was going to line his pockets with gold. Nope. I think Jesus just knew a nice person when he saw one, like the ones who brought all those presents.

When I was 13, home from boarding school, on Christmas morning there was an envelope in the branches of the Christmas tree. That's what every 13-year-old wants, an envelope. Not clothing, books, or music purchased by out-of-step older relatives. You want an envelope because you can't fit an ugly shirt or a stupid book in an envelope. You put money in an envelope! With such joy, I opened that magic envelope!

It was a year's subscription to a Christian magazine for teenage boys. Oh, yeah, make my day.

It took a good 30 years for me to grow up enough to know that my dear aunt and uncle loved me so much that they cared about my rebellious, wayward 13-year-old soul and about my faith. That envelope was full of love. They gave it right. I took it wrong. The problem wasn't the giver. The problem wasn't the gift. The problem was me. I was too immature to see the love.

There's the Christmas key: one gives with love. One receives with love. The perfect present.

Our final Christmas Carol tonight is "Joy to the World."

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive its king;
let ev'ry heart prepare him room,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.*