

A Monthly Message from Pastor Mike and Mandy

Dear Parish Family,

The wise men brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ Child in fulfillment of the prophecy in *Isaiah 60:6* (See also *Psalms 72:10-12*), "All those from Sheba shall come; They shall bring gold and incense, And they shall proclaim the praises of the Lord." (NKJV) The wise men fell down on their knees and worshiped the Child.

What did Mary and Joseph do with the gifts? To this question *Matthew* gives no answer. But we know that the gifts were given in honor of and in thanksgiving for Jesus, the Son of God, Immanuel, Ruler, and Shepherd of Israel.

In the Babylonian flood story recounted in the *Atrahasis Epic*, Enlil determines to destroy the human race because that noisy bunch was disturbing the tranquility of the gods like himself. In the *Gilgamesh Epic*, where another version of the Babylonian flood story is found, the gods hover like flies over the sacrifice that Utnapishtim makes to them after he leaves the ark. Apparently, they require the nourishment from the sacrifice.

These stories are not morally edifying and differ greatly from the conception of God in the *Old Testament*. Gifts to God do not serve to sustain Him in His Being. In the flood narrative in *Genesis*, God destroys most of humankind, not because they are noisy, but because of their great sin. The sweet aroma of sacrifices to the God of Israel does not represent food for Him. He needs nothing of the sort. Sacrifices in the Old Testament were for the benefit of the people who offered them. In *Deuteronomy 26*, the worshipper presents first fruits in thankful response to the Lord who had given the land.

Our offerings are a grateful response to God. The prayers of Holy Communion express this thought: "Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us..." *{Lutheran Book of Worship, p. 67}* Our gifts presented in the Eucharist include praise and thanksgiving, our monetary offerings, and the bread and wine. And most importantly, as Paul writes in *Romans 12*, we offer our very selves as a living sacrifice and a reasonable service.

Our gifts are united to the self-offering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They are a grateful response to the supreme gift of the sacrifice of Christ, the one, all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world, and of His victory over death in whose wake we are given eternal life, as well as, a grateful response to all the gifts of God.

The last two verses of *We Three Kings of Orient Are* indicate a connection between the gifts of the wise men and Christ's sacrifice and deity. Myrrh is a bitter perfume that bespeaks Christ's suffering and death. Then, in the last verse we hear, "Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice."

Professor Raymond Brown writes in his monumental work, *The Birth of the Messiah*, There are preachers who are uneasy about the popularity of this story (Matthew's birth account, mine), feeling that it serves as a palliative for true Gospel. But this is to neglect the fact that the infancy narrative contains both the cross and the God-given triumph." *{The Birth of the Messiah, Doubleday and Company: Garden City, New York, 1977, p. 232}* He further adds that the birth story communicates the coming of God's Kingdom and its rejection by some and acceptance by others (p. 232).

With the wise men, let us present our gifts in grateful response for the salvation won for us in Jesus Christ. And let us praise God for the great thing He has done.

In Christ,
Pastor Mike & Pastor Mandy

What Tidings, Shepherds, Did You Hear

What tidings, shepherds, did you hear when angels bright to you appeared? News of the Savior, Christ and Lord, Who in His time all things restores.

God's glory fills the heav'nly heights, while peace from Uncreated Light descends to fill the favored ones, the daughters chosen with the sons.

'Blessed is the King who in the Name of God, the Lord, among us came. The voices of His people raised sing with the angels solemn praise.*

The swaddled Child of Bethlehem, the One from father Jesse's stem, by cross and rising brought to earth the peace announced upon His birth.

With shepherds blithe let us reveal the wonders of the Christ who heals our every sin and troubled thought by the salvation He has wrought.

*We praise You God, the Lord of all, Your only Son, who did us call, one with the Spirit, present now, who us with splendid gifts endows.
Commentary on "What Tidings, Shepherds, Di You Hear"*

Vs. 1 In the Lucan birth story, the angel tells the shepherds that Jesus is Savior, Christ, and Lord. The angelic choir responds with praise to God.

Vs. 2 The angels proclaim glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth

Vs. 3 In Luke's version of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the people proclaim peace and glory in heaven as well as, "Blessed is the King..." We also sing with the angels.

Vs. 4. Jesus was from the House of David, whose father was Jesse. Our salvation is accomplished in the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Vs. 5. We finally give praise to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in light of the story of salvation.

Tune: Conditor Alme Siderum

*Michael Tavella
December 8,
2010*