



From the Pulpit: January 2, 2022
Epiphany Sunday

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Matthew 2:1–12

Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, VII: Gifts

During Advent and Christmastime we are preaching on Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season—Candy Canes, Snow, Evergreens, Donkeys. While each of these tangible items illuminates an aspect of our multi-faceted God, none of them have been mentioned in the biblical nativity narratives until today. Today our symbol is gifts.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also

go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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Rebekah McCahan may have the best job in finance. Her official title is Senior Investment and Portfolio Strategist at PNC Financial Services. More notably, every year since 1986 she has priced out the cost of the items in the 12 days of Christmas song to create the most entertaining economic report I know of, the Christmas Price Index. This year, the price for one set of gifts (not the full song repeated)

is \$41,205.58 up 5.7%, mostly due to what PNC calls “the volatile birds trend.” Six geese-a-laying are up a staggering 57%. Seven-swans-a-swimming, often the most expensive gift on the list, will set you back over \$13,000.¹

¹ <https://www.pnc.com/en/about-pnc/topics/pnc-christmas-price-index.html>

This curious festive, report spurs countless questions. How much do milkmaids get paid in 2021? Minimum wage according to McCahan. What about the nine ladies dancing? How long do they dance? Do you also need to purchase the venue? That I don't know but this year's quote came from a modern dance company in Philadelphia. Incidentally last year the price index excluded live performances due to covid.

Then there is the question of what to do with all of the total of 23 birds that require care and feeding. If you say no, thank you to the gift of feathered friends, you are not alone. The pandemic has accelerated shifts in gift giving. One professor wrote that because of both supply chain issues and going "to sleep with visions of Greta Thunberg dancing in her head...warning that buying more newly manufactured stuff is a nightmare for the planet", her family has shifted to gifting experiences rather than items. Experiences like a visit to the Philadelphia Ballet to see the Lords and Leaping, or a trip to the water park with cousins.²

Other families have adopted the four gift strategy popularized by bloggers, "Something you want, something you need, something you wear, something to read" to curb consumerism and waste. American gift giving habits it seems are undergoing a transformation³. Even so do not fear. Though the semi-sacred symbol of gifts has ancient roots, our modern traditions are relatively new.

In his sermon on snow Bill [Evertsberg] named Emperor Constantine's attachment of the celebration for the nativity of our Lord to the pagan Saturnalia festival as, "the most genius marketing strategy in the history of marketing strategies. Today Christmas is well over a trillion-dollar industry."⁴ If Constantine is the market-

ing executive, then it is Washington Irving and Clement Clark Moore who, in the 19th century, rebranded Christmas into the tradition we know today: a home focused celebration, with stockings hung by the fire with care, and gifts piled under the tree.

Before Moore, Irving, and the elite of New York got a hold of Christmas, December was a more drunken, raucous time of "social inversion," where the poor could

knock on the doors of the wealthy, demanding food and drink, taking to the streets, abandoning social constraints like it was New Year's Eve or Halloween.⁵ In fact Puritans in the 18th century attempted to suppress Christmas because of its pagan roots of Saturnalia and the tendency for "misrule."⁶ As New York City's population grew the rowdy celebrations that spilled into the streets concerned the middle and upper class residents.

While traditions are malleable, successfully transforming social customs requires a compelling story, and it was Irving who first provided the legend of St. Nicholas. In 1809, writing under the pen name "Deid-

rich Knickerbocker" he wrote an embellished *History of New York*. According to Irving, St. Nicholas adorned and protected the Dutch ship, the Good Woman, on its journey to the new world. In a dream, St. Nicholas rode over the trees in the same wagon he used to deliver gifts to children, guiding the Dutch to the place to build their fort.

And so the minor character of St. Nicholas received the proper patina of Dutch aristocracy, when Irving wrote they "instituted that pious ceremony, still religiously observed in all our ancient families of the right breed, of hanging up a stocking in the chimney on St. Nicholas Eve; which stocking is always found in the morning

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²<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covid-christmas-gift-lesson-experiences-matter-more-stuff-ncna1285787>

³<https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/consumer-insights/consumer-trends/pandemic-gift-giving-behavior/>

⁴<https://kuc.org/sermon-archive/certain-semi-sacred->

[symbols-of-the-season-iv-snow/](#)

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/12/why-people-give-christmas-gifts/421908/>

⁶ Nissenbaum, Stephen, *The Battle for Christmas*

miraculously filled; for the good St. Nicholas has ever been a great giver of gifts, particularly to children.”⁷ Keeping up with the Joneses, or in this case the Knickerbockers, meant fashioning Christmas traditions into a home based celebration resembling what Irving claimed the best families did.

In *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, Irving’s friend, Clement Clark Moore added the details and the reindeer to create the story we all know as ‘*Twas the Night Before Christmas*. One biographer noted, Irving “did all he could to make minor customs into major customs—to make them enriching signs of family and social togetherness.”⁸ Later inspired by Irving’s Bracebridge Hall Christmas essays, Dickens again expanded the Christmas narrative. And so the gift giving tradition we know today began to be formed in the 19th century.

That spirit of generous giving that eventually expanded beyond the home to those in need continues today. You see it in this church’s support of Christopher House’s Family to Family giving coordinated by Liz Dischner and team. And in the Children’s Ministries gift giving to Lawrence Hall led by Julia Peterson and Melanie Earle. Thanks to these leaders hundreds of children received gifts through the outreach of this congregation this year, an expression of Christ-like love and care for our neighbors.

So on this Sunday before Epiphany, the ninth day of Christmas, in a time when we are again seeking to alter gift giving traditions, let us turn from the drummers drumming and the sugar plums dancing, to the Bible narrative. What from the Gospel of Matthew’s account of the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh offered by the astrologers from Persia might guide us faithfully

forward in shaping traditions that reflect the meaning of Christmas?

The three gifts appear near the end of this passage coming as a response to divine revelation, the appearance of the Messiah. The revelation is received not by the priests and scribes, not by Herod the Great, but by outsiders from far away. They brought gold for a king, frankincense worthy of God, and spice for the suffering redeemer.⁹ Recognizing that God’s promise has come in the flesh to live and dwell among them, the Magi come to pay him homage, to bow down in worship. Some commentators list bowing in worship as the first gift, for a total of four gifts: something for worship, something for the one who rules our hearts, something for prayer, something for the one who gives us new life.

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Each weekday of December, Katie Lancaster offered us the gift of a daily devotional called “Nativity as Prayer.” Based on each of the four gospel narratives her reflections point

us toward the Christ child, God with us. We’ve printed her nativity blessings on cards for you to take with you after the postlude. The gift of her words and the gift of today’s narrative is not just for Advent and Christmas-tide, but for the whole year through. May we look for God in our midst in the physical, everyday world; in the semi-sacred symbols; in gifts given and received, in those people from places near and far who tell us of divine love. And like the Magi, may we offer our four gifts to God each and every day. Gifts of worship, prayer, devotion, and treasure. May these gifts transform our lives and the world. Let us rejoice, for as the hymn we are about to sing says,
‘Love has come and never will leave us!
Love is life everlasting and free.
Love is Jesus within and among us.
Love is the peace our hearts are seeking.’
Love! Love! Love is the gift of Christmas.

⁷ Irving, *A History of New York*, 1849, p 132, accessed at https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_History_of_New_York/MIkRAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0

⁸<https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/fall/feature/how-washington-irving-shaped-christmas-in-america>

⁹ R. Alan Culpepper, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p. 571.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

As we awaken to this new day,
this new season,
this new year:
be for us a sacred home.
Be for us ancient indwelling peace.
Be rest for the weary.
Be great stability amid turbulence.
Be a guide in the snow-tossed landscape.

Meet us in our own wordless silence.
Stir us awake to the embodied encounter of your
presence.
Rehearse within us the texture of love.
Untangle the ache in our heart.
Make gentle our unrest.

Hear us as we bring before you our well-worn
worries:
the health of our families,
the weight of travel,
the post-holiday clash of grief and joy,
the return to school,
the frazzled responsibilities,
the capacity for more of the same to undo us.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Hear us as we bring before you
the burdens of this moment:
the fire and ice in Colorado,
the rising caseload in hospitals and homes,
the uncertainty of another surge mid-winter.

Lord, hear our prayer.

As we remember Desmond Tutu,
we hear his voice echo across time and place,
saying “hope is being able to see
that there is light despite all the darkness.”

Give us a starlit path.
Show us the morning star.
Let your invisible love jostle us toward
overflowing.
And hear us as we pray: Our Father...Amen.

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