

The Epiphany
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Many of you came over to my house this past summer when we had a welcome potluck for George. We got lucky. The day was just gorgeous, and it was delightful to see members from 8 months to 85 years old all enjoying each other's company while welcoming a new priest into our community. A few weeks before that party, I remember wondering whether we ought to go potluck or whether I should just order sandwich trays from Beans and Barley. These are the kinds of weighty decisions that seminary does not prepare one to handle.

But I worried: would there be enough for everyone? Anyone who has ever been to a St. Mark's event knows that this is an insane worry. There is always enough. But, what with trying to welcome newcomers and make people feel warm and woven into the community, I was a little scared that instead of showing abundance, we would instead be showing a few dry crackers and a cold egg bake.

Of course, I was wrong. As people started to arrive at the party, the most astonishing array of cheeses, meats, wine, spicy potatoes, salads, fruit, and appetizers filled my dining room table so I could almost hear groaning under the weight of such bounty. And I had leftovers for days.

I find it very pleasant to think of summer afternoons as a community gathered around food rather than dark winter days with increased COVID protocols as we weather yet another surge in cases in our city.

But remembering our last church potluck is more than just pleasant; actually, I find it instructive for this feast of the Epiphany.

As you know, this is the day we commemorate the wise men who came at the urging of a star in the sky to bring gifts to the infant Jesus. One assumes these were foreign figures of some stature — maybe kings or advisors to kings. And they bring with them the gifts we all memorized in Sunday School — gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There are a few classic ways to think of the wise men from the east. Some folks will say that they are a way to emphasize the way in which the Christ child came for the whole world. Others will say that they are a way to emphasize that the true ruler of earth is not in a palace but in a stable. And still, others will say that the wise men symbolize the way that the rich should turn their attention and affection to the poor. All of these are perfectly good and indeed wise ways to look at the story. I suppose today, you might say that the tech giants of the world spent some time at a border crossing, paying homage to refugees fleeing violence and poverty in their home countries. Imagine Elon Musk handing out water bottles to Guatemalan immigrants after their long and dangerous journey. That's the kind of radical scene the Gospel of Luke is trying to paint this morning. Any good piece of scripture will have many different interpretations, and we can peel back the wisdom like the skin of an onion.

But this Epiphany, as I was thinking about gifts, I was wondering what happens in a year when you don't feel like you have a lot to give. I know that parents and teachers are all exhausted as are students and toddlers. A professor friend of mine told me that her students are acting like it's week ten of the semester when it's only week three. And she attributes this to the added, daily stresses of dealing with changing protocols and canceled plans. I know that healthcare workers are exhausted as are small business owners or anyone who works with the public. So, I believe, many folks right now feel like they do not have very much to offer to Jesus. The cups are a little empty, and the wells are a little dry.

Here's the miracle of the thing: those wise men didn't come alone. And, in fact, the Bible doesn't say that there were just three of them. We don't know how many. Maybe there were 60. Maybe a hundred? And the Bible is constantly leaving out the contributions of women, so I am choosing to believe that they were there also. And I bet you anything that some of them didn't feel like they had a lot to offer. Imagine going through your closets trying to figure out what to bring the Son of God on his birthday. It's a daunting task.

But here is where our summer potluck is instructive. Not only did the table overflow from the gifts of this community. Not only was everyone fed. But there was extra. There was abundance, as there always is in God's economy.

So, bring your fatigue and annoyance to the manger. And bring your imperfect homeschooling and your worries. Bring short tempers and sleepless nights. Bring canceled travel plans and longing to see family. And what you will find is that, underneath all that, there are moments of kindness and generosity and flashes of humor and inspiration. Somehow, and somehow, what we bring to Jesus will be enough. What little we bring to Jesus will be transformed into bounty. I know this because I have seen it in action. The Christian life is a paradox: from little comes plenty.

So, wise people, the gifts you bring today are sufficient. They are holy. And indeed, they are a God-blessed bounty. Amen.