

# Margreta Silverstone: What is the Gift?

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## What is the Gift?

[Matthew 2: 1-12](#)

[Ephesians 3: 1-12](#)

There are probably a number of reasons why I am up here today. One is that Celebration Circle asked. Another is that I generally do preach once a year and I did not do that as part of the routine L&T contributions this fall. Finally, I stand here because somehow I felt that I did have something to say to my community. Therefore, it is with fear and wonder that I stand here. At work, I committed to improving my public speaking skills. I told them this was how I would do that. Finally, I stand here because somehow I felt that I did have something to say to my community. Therefore, it is with fear and wonder that I stand here.

Now, the challenge for me in this Sunday is how to breathe new life to an old story. I cannot seem to help but hear Handel every time I read the Isaiah passage. I cannot help hearing "We three kings" both the good version and the bad one, when I read the New Testament story. Therefore, it is simply difficult for me to get out of the old tried and true music and story running in my head. That is a big reason for the initial piece of music this morning, trying to help you break out of hearing the familiar.

Let me also say that Celebration Circle gave me permission to do whatever. As one member of the group said, "There will only be eight people there, so feel free to say whatever you want."

While the comment was funny, it also made me think, "What, I can't say whatever I want if there were 12?"

The theme for the Epiphany season is, I have called you by name, you are mine. I hope to weave that into today's message as well.

## **The Gifts of the Magi**

For the past couple of weeks, I have been reflecting on the question of "what is the gift?" when reading the passages for today.

The Psalmist asks God to give the King the gifts of justice, righteousness and prosperity. The psalmist also asks that other countries give the King gifts, like gold. Moreover, the people are asked to bring the gift of prayer.

Isaiah speaks of gifts brought to Jerusalem. Ships would bring gifts from far away countries. Gifts of gold and incense would be brought from Sheba.

The Matthew passage for today speaks of how the Magi came to the home where Jesus was living and presented gifts to him and his family. Jesus no longer is living in the stable, despite how many of our old and favorite songs of this story go. The Magi present three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Gold has long been a valuable commodity. Gold has been used as a monetary measure for centuries. The development of coinage dates back to the 6th century BC in the district of Lydia, in Asia Minor, at that time the principal industrial and trading country of the ancient world. Before that time, gold in granular or bar form was used as the measure of trade.

While gold no longer is the standard for our monetary system, gold continues to play a critical role in our society. Because gold can conduct electricity, computers, telephones and home appliances use it in their circuitry. Because gold has high

reflective powers, gold protects spacecrafts and satellites. Gold-coated mirrors reflect heat in photocopiers. Gold-plated ovens dry the paint on automobiles. Moreover, because gold is biologically inactive, it has medical applicability. Gold implants in people's eyelids help people with a condition where their eyelids do not close naturally. The extra weight of the gold allows the eyelid to close and the normal muscles in the eyelid keep the eye open. Gold does not corrode and it does not react with a person's tears.

Clearly if three people came a long distance and offered you a gift of gold today, you could appreciate it. The other two gifts, frankincense and myrrh would be a bit harder.

Both frankincense and myrrh are the gifts of trees. Frankincense trees grow on the Somali coast, without soil, out of polished marble rock. The trees are attached by a thick oval mass of substances resembling a mixture of lime and mortar. Myrrh is more of a bush than a tree. The bushes do not grow more than 9 feet in height. They grow in an area along the Red Sea coast; in an area that has been so bare and dry, the area has been nicknamed hell.

For both, the process of getting these gifts from the trees is similar; the tree must be wounded. A deep cut is made in the trunk of the tree and below it, a narrow strip of bark is peeled off. After the initial incision has hardened, it is wounded again – deeper. In about three months, the resin, the tree sap or fluid, has attained the required degree of consistency, hardening into 'tears.' The tree's tears are gathered, scraped off into baskets. The season for gathering frankincense lasts from May until the first rain shower in mid-September. Myrrh is harvested twice a year.

Frankincense's value was in ritual and death. Jewish tradition used it as a sacrifice as prescribed in [Exodus 30:34-38](#). Babylonian tradition used in the feast of Bel. Pharaohs believed that burning it would allow them to commune with the

gods. At the funeral of Nero's wife, an entire year's harvest of frankincense was burned. It was used to embalm bodies.

Myrrh's value was in its ability to soothe muscles and wounds. In a culture that did not bathe frequently, it was also valued for its role as an ingredient in perfume. In addition, according to one source I read, Egyptians would burn pellets of myrrh to eliminate pests in the home, such as fleas. Myrrh was a valuable, practical gift.

In preparing for this sermon, I found a wonderful website with photographs of the molecular structure of frankincense and myrrh (see <http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/religion/index.html> for these elements and other religious elements). I have posted them upstairs. At its core, myrrh is full of blues and greens, cooling colors. It is a woven image, with cross hairs like the threads of a fabric in two directions. Myrrh looks like something that can bind and hold together other things. Frankincense, on the other hand, is warm, full of reds and yellows and some greens and blues. It looks soft and featherlike in its structure. It looks like it could comfort you with its gentleness, like a down comforter.

It is hard for us today to imagine the Frankincense trading route. Camel caravan to Egypt, Persia, Syria and Rome transported goods from India, China and Ethiopia. Tarshish and Sheba were important points on this trading route. In 1998, archeologists resorted to satellite technology to trace the old trading route through Yemen. An article in the October 1998 Smithsonian Magazine describes this exploration. I will provide a link to the preview for the article, which includes some wonderful photos, in the web version of this sermon ( <http://www.smithsonianmag.si.edu/smithsonian/issues98/oct98/yemen.html> ). The story poignantly demonstrated our loss of the value of frankincense. Frankincense sells \$2/\$3 a pound near its source. A radio show, the Savvy Traveler, has been also doing a series on following the trading route. [The show's website](#) includes audio, transcripts and photos.

## Being Frankincense and Myrrh

It troubles me that we have lost the appreciation for gifts that recognize the power of woundedness and death. Maybe not that Seekers has lost that ability, but our society has. For those of us who took part in the recent School of Christian Living class on spiritual direction, one of the most powerful classes was the circle of named woundedness. We did not do that exercise to grovel in our own pain, but to try to find the gift in the middle of that pain. To, by naming, offer ourselves as frankincense and myrrh. By naming our own familiarity with pain and death, we were able to offer comfort and soothing.

It troubles me that I have such difficulty in appreciating both my own gifts and others gifts to recognize the power of woundedness and death. Nearly three years ago, [I preached](#) about my own wilderness experience of a miscarriage and a quilt that I made during that time to accompany me. Yet, at that point, I stated my own belief I was being called to a newness of a change in work. I thought the work shift was my new birth. The work part may have been true, but I was wrong in refusing to live into my own woundedness and the gift of it. God often teaches me the same lesson again if I have not learned. Three years and now six miscarriages have made it hard for me to ignore the wound. Moreover, it is hard for me to find the frankincense and myrrh in this, my life.

In the circle of naming wounds, when it came my turn, I could not name this pain. So I know I invented something glib to say. Yet, at the same time, throughout that whole evening of sharing and working with spiritual direction, the true wound was present. For those who were part of that evening, you held my tears, even if you did not know why. Some of you did know why. Moreover, in that holy circle, I received gifts of frankincense and myrrh. Your familiarity with deep pain and grief brought comfort. I think tomorrow's memorial for Kevin's

father is another sign of that gift.

A few weeks ago, some people came to Seekers. In the time after the service, their story of loss came out. In that space and time, I found I could only trust God to make me frankincense and myrrh for another. I hope I brought comfort and soothing to them.

This certainly is not easy work. Being frankincense and myrrh is a sacrifice of woundedness and tears. Like the trees, it requires a willingness to be hurt, to heal, to be hurt again and to produce tears that others can use.

How great a gift is the ability to bind and hold things together? How great a gift is the ability to wrap things in the warmth of love? As our society runs headlong into valuing youth and health, ignoring or hiding its wounds and death, how great a gift is the ability to recognize and sooth wounds and death, to be frankincense and myrrh? How valuable was the gift the Magi brought to Jesus. What valuable gifts can we bring to God and to each other?

## **The Gift of God – The Gift of Relationship**

Therefore, at this time of Epiphany, the Magi and us have the opportunity to give to God gifts. Nevertheless, what is the gift God gives to us?

Paul Flucke, in his story "The Secret of the Gifts," tells what Jesus gave the Magi. While Gasper brought with him gold for Jesus, when he put down the gold it magically turned into a hammer, a hammer that represented how Gasper destroyed others in his greed for money. Moreover, Gasper was given the ability to leave that greed behind with Jesus and live a changed life. Similarly, Melchior and Balthasar brought gifts that were transformed. What they were able to leave with Jesus allowed them to live new lives, free of troubles, jealousy and

anger. God, through Jesus, gave the Magi the gifts of new life.

I think the wonder in the gift of Jesus is that God has extended an invitation to the foreigner. The invitation reads, "Welcome, you can come to me in freedom and confidence anytime. My door is always open." If [Marjorie's sermon last week](#) was about the mystery of God's opening of life to the poor and disenfranchised, today is about life opened to the foreigner. All the passages for today refer to ways the foreigner is included. Paul, in Ephesians, comments on how God's invitation has been extended to the Gentiles. I will paraphrase Paul in Ephesians 3: 10-12, through the church and through Jesus, we, foreigners, may come to God in freedom and confidence. We have the ability to go to God with anything, with joy, with sorrow, with pain.

As you know, Jeffrey and I recently moved to Takoma Park, While the journey was no where near as long or arduous as that of the wise men, it was a change and it was an unknown. We heard a small voice saying we needed to go. We did not have the luxury of a new star. Nevertheless, we went anyway. We are still slowly unpacking boxes and slowly getting to know new neighbors. We are enjoying our shorter commutes to work. I enjoy the walk home from the metro in the evenings. Moreover, the challenge for me has been trying to be open to the why of this new life. What is the gift of this new home and place?

A few days before Christmas, a hand delivered invitation appeared in our mail slot. The invitation, from a neighbor we had just met on the street a few days prior, was addressed to "Jeffrey and Margreta". I had met Peter, but not Melissa, the writer of the invitation. Melissa had spelled my name correctly! Simply that recognition that the neighbor knew my name was a wonder. However, the wonder did not end there, the writer had put on the invitation "I am a quilter too!" Yet, she knew me. She knew my name and my passion.

While I can tell you the story of how it is that she came to know my name, which I found out when we visited their home, I will not. The wonder is that I was known and welcomed. Moreover, the wonder is that I have been invited into relationship with new people; Melissa asked if I would consider having a small quilting group meet together. At Melissa's home, I also met Barbara, another neighbor who does a variety of crafts, including quilting.

God has extended us an invitation, personally addressed. Beyond the invitation of my neighbors, God's personal invitation is a gift where our lives can be changed. God provides comfort and soothing. Are we willing to be about giving God's gift to others? Are we willing to be in relationship? Would our colleagues at work and our neighbors benefit from our ability to offer deep, valuable gifts to them, like the gifts of comfort and the hope for the power to change our lives?