

Giving Him my Heart. A Christmas morning meditation, December 25, 2016, St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, Rev. Herb Hilder.

Texts: LUKE 2:1-20
 COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

Luke's Gospel, chapter 2 – it is a scene with which many of us growing up within the church and the public school system in the '60's learned to act out very well

In another time and place maybe we were one of the cast of the manger scene drama.

In the plays of my childhood, there were no lines to memorize,

We only had to follow directions – move here!

Look surprised!

Show wonder!

Stay still!

Be reverent!

Not all of the little people involved wanted to wear bathrobes, wings or turbans

And very few wanted to look like sheep!

These nativity plays of my childhood are now a memory,

Yet he as the years pass,

The story from which the play and its script come has lost none of its sense of wonder, mystery and awe.

There's Mary – cherishing the miracle of the new life before her.

There is Joseph – the stalwart and faithful husband who stands behind the manger – his eyes big with joy.

I wonder what the stable smelt like.

I wonder how many animals were already present when a very pregnant Mary and Joseph moved in.

I wonder when the shepherds enter the scene whether they do not have some of their stray sheep who have followed them to the stable

And then there are those mysterious wise men from the East.

Not in the Luke account of Jesus' birth, but certainly detailed in Matthew's account.

Tradition says there were 3 of them owing to the three luxurious, but definitely not baby friendly gifts.

Yet, it is those gifts that tradition also says were sold to get Joseph's little family out of Herod's clutches and then back to Nazareth after Herod's death.

I wonder what the Wise men experienced on their journey to Bethlehem

For wealth and status in Biblical times did not give one first class travel or overnight accommodation.

Years ago, I was introduced to 20th c poet T.S.
Eliot's, 'The Journey of the Magi'
It's a great poem to trigger the imagination
Let me read just one stanza

**A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sorefooted,
refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the
terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
and running away, and wanting their liquor
and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack
of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns
unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high
prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.**

This morning, I want us to enter the story at the time not long after Jesus' birth by using a picture and a question from a hymn.

The picture is titled 'The Nativity' and it reproduced or at least 2/3rds of it is reproduced on your bulletin cover.



I just love the palette and boldness of colour in all Swanson's painting
 And the Nativity is part of a triptych –on the wall –
 invite you to spend some time with the poster after the service.

The question is from Christina Rossetti's 19th hymn *In the Bleak Mid-Winter*.

Rosette does take some license with the meteorological description of the event

She is not suggesting that it literally snowed in Bethlehem

She is drawing on a long established literary idea of associating snow with Jesus' birth.

And 'bleak mid-winter' what a great image of what winter would be like without the birth of Jesus.

4th verse of the hymn begins with an open-ended question

What can I give Him, poor as I am

Look at your bulletin cover – what are the people bringing to Jesus?

Precious gifts – sacrificial gifts from people who live on the edge

Though it might be hard to believe – remember – most people in the Bible lived on the financial and social edge – with not even today's imperfect social safety net we take for granted.

One person – foreground left – is giving sticks – to keep the fire going so that Baby Jesus is kept warm

Moving right – young man with a container of
eggs – nothing fancy, but nutritious
Then there is the woman left near Mary – a dish of
food – tortillas?

I wonder, the scripture warrant for casseroles
in church.

The bearded man behind her – loaves of bread on
his back

Moving up the path – a shepherdess with a sheep,
A woman with a jug on her head.

I wonder is this water or something more
celebratory for Baby Jesus' parents.

A man leading a cow – milk

So, what is being offered in this painting is
also not necessarily baby friendly, but the
necessities for life – break, milk, fire, eggs, dishes of
food.

As we enter the story and attempt to come to
terms with the question posed by Rossetti's hymn,
What can we give Baby Jesus?

We can try to give to him a significant and
noticeable portion of our most precious
commodity – no it's not money – it is time!

We can try to give him our obedience, our
trust, our allegiance,
Our willingness to serve others and not have to be
number #1 or centre.

Yet, all of this, as important as it is,

Recedes into the background as and when we give Jesus what Rossetti ends the hymn on.

OUR HEART

For when we can do this faithfully,
Unconditionally,
Intentionally and purposefully, then the rest follows.

Giving our heart, recalls the command of Moses to God's people as together the people and Moses are about to cross over from slavery and oppression in Egypt to the Promised Land

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6

In scripture, the heart is the location of all the affections and emotions.

The heart determines how we handle everything that life throws at us.

The heart then is the spiritual centre of our lives. To give to God our heart then is to give him our best, all of us, and not merely the leftovers.

You see,

And I think this is what Rossetti's hymn is highlighting – God does not want or particularly want our stuff and things – though giving of the

stuff remains a good protective shield against greed.

No, what God really and earnestly desires is our heart – ultimately all of us, all we are. All we think,

All we act

Every part of us

This has never been easy to do

But a good starting point remains considering this story – through scripture, music, poetry, art

Pondering and reflecting on its words and what it announces – as Mary did with the shepherds on that night

Considering all that God in Christ has done, is doing and will do in each of our lives.

Holding those thoughts before us as the question of the hymn is reflected upon – *what can I give him, poor as I am?*

Surely in this light – can there be any other answer to work and strive toward, but the one that ends the hymn.

Yet, what can I give Him: give him my heart.

And **that is** I believe the call and the challenge before each of us – now, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and the day after that and so on.

AMEN