

**The Generosity of Light**  
**January 3, 2010**  
**2nd Sunday after Christmas, Year C**

**Text: John 1:1-18**

It never ceases to amaze me as to how quickly Christmas comes and Christmas goes and suddenly we find ourselves into the New Year. But before Christmas Day becomes too distant a memory, we gather together on this, the Second Sunday after Christmas. We sing one last time a few Christmas hymns. And once again we tell the story of God's gift to us through the birth of Jesus Christ.

This time the Christmas story is told to us by John. It is a different kind of story than the one told to us by Matthew and Luke. In John's story there is no mention of a journey to Bethlehem. There is no manger, no angels, no shepherds, nor star in the night. There really is no mention of Jesus by name. The main focus John's Christmas narrative is *word, light and life*. Gospel begins with these words:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

Traditionally this is the lesson that is read each Christmas Eve as part of our candle lighting service. We begin in darkness. As each candle is lit the darkness gives way to the light. This is a powerful visual image of the words of John's Gospel: Sometimes the simplest of elements like water, wine, bread and light candle help us to understand deepest of theological concepts.

Several years ago, I ran across a book titled *Anam Cara : A Book of Celtic Wisdom*. In it author John O'Donohue describes what he calls the *generosity of light*.

*If you have ever had occasion to be out early in the morning before the dawn breaks, you will have noticed that the darkest time of night is immediately before dawn. The darkness deepens and becomes more anonymous. If you had never been to the world and never known what a day was, you couldn't possibly imagine how the darkness breaks, how the mystery and color of a new day arrive. Light is incredibly generous, but also gentle. When you attend to the way the dawn comes, you learn how light can coax the dark. The first fingers of light appear on the horizon, and ever so deftly and gradually, they pull the mantle of darkness away from the world. Quietly before you is the mystery of a new dawn; the new day.*

This is how God's grace comes to us, as a gentle light appearing on the horizon and ever so deftly and gradually pulling the mantle of darkness away from the world. And quietly before us is the mystery of a new dawn, a new day, and a new life.

Jesus is God's gift of light to us. But every gift deserves a gracious response. What shall we give in return for this gift? As an answer that question, I would like to share with you a story by author Henry Van Dyke. It is called ***The Other Wise Man***.

*In ancient Persia, there lived a man named Artaban, a tall dark man with brilliant eyes. His robe was pure white wool thrown over a tunic of white silk; and a pointed cap rested on his flowing black hair. It was the dress of the ancient priesthood of the Magi.*

*One night Artaban he told some of his friends, "Three of my colleagues are watching at the ancient temple in Babylon. If the promised star appears, they will wait 10 days for me, and then we will set out together for Jerusalem, to see and worship the One who shall be born King of Israel. I have sold my possessions, and bought three gifts to carry as a tribute to the king." While he was speaking he thrust his hand into the inmost fold of his clothing and drew out three great gems – a sapphire as blue as a fragment of the night sky, a ruby redder than a ray of sunrise, and a pearl as pure as the peak of a snow mountain at twilight.*

*As Artaban watched the sky that night, a steel-blue spark was born out of the darkness. It pulsed in the enormous sky as if the three jewels had mingled and then been transformed into a living heart of light. "It is the sign," he said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet him."*

*At nightfall on the 10th day, Artaban was only three hours away from the temple where he was to meet his friends. Suddenly, his horse stood still before a dark object in the road. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying there, moaning.*

*Artaban's heart leaped to his throat. How could he stay here to care for a dying stranger? The three Wise Men would go on without him. Should he risk the great reward of his faith for the sake of a single deed of charity?*

*"God of truth and purity," he prayed, "direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom which you only know." Then Artaban dismounted and carried the man to a little mound at the foot of a palm tree. Hour after hour he labored to comfort and help the stranger. At last, the man's strength returned.*

*The stranger whispered to Artaban, "I have nothing to give you in return - only this: I am a Jew, and our prophets have said that the Messiah for whom you seek will be born not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. May the Lord bring you in safety to that place, because you had pity on me."*

*It was now past midnight and indeed, the three Wise Men had gone on without Artaban. Artaban covered his head in despair. "I must now sell my sapphire to buy a train of camels and provisions for the journey."*

*Artaban arrived in Bethlehem three days after the three Wise Men had departed, after seeing the Christ Child. He entered the open door of a cottage and found a young mother singing her baby to sleep. In her gentle speech, she told him, "Joseph of Nazareth took the child Jesus and his mother Mary and fled away secretly in the night."*

*Suddenly, there came the noise of a wild confusion in the streets of the village and a cry: "The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children." The young mother's face grew white with terror, and she clasped her child to her bosom, and crouched in the darkest corner of the room.*

*Artaban went quickly and stood in the doorway. The soldiers came hurrying down the street with bloody hands and dripping swords. The captain of the guard approached, and Artaban said in a low voice, "I am all alone in this place, and I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace." The captain stretched out his hand and took the ruby. "March on!" he cried to his men; "There is no child here."*

*Artaban turned to the east and prayed, "God of truth, forgive me. Two of my gifts are gone. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?" But the woman wept for joy and said: "Because you have saved the life of my little one, may the Lord bless and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."*

*Artaban continued on, traveling from country to country, searching for the King. Though he found no one to worship, he found many to help. He fed the hungry, and clothed the naked; he healed the sick, and comforted the captive.*

*Thirty three years had passed. Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the King, he came for the last time to Jerusalem. Excitement was flashing through the city's crowds. "Have you not heard what has happened?" they asked Artaban. "Today they are crucifying Jesus of Nazareth, who says he is the Son of God and the King of the Jews." Artaban's heart beat unsteadily. "I have come in time to offer my pearl in ransom for the King's life," he thought.*

*A group of soldiers came down the street dragging a girl. She broke suddenly from her tormentors and threw herself at Artaban's feet. "Save me," she cried. "I am to be sold as a slave. Save me!"*

*Was this his great opportunity or his last temptation? Twice the gift he had for God had gone to serve a human being. He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so luminous, so radiant. He laid it in the hand of the girl. "This is your ransom. It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the king."*

*And while he spoke, a shuddering earthquake rocked the city, and the sky grew*

*dark. A heavy tile fell and struck the old man on the temple. The girl bent over him. She heard a voice come through the twilight, like music from a distance. The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one.*

*Then the old man's lips began to move, as if in answer: "Not so, my lord: For when did I see you hungry and feed thee? Or thirsty and give you drink? When did I see you a stranger, and take you in? Or naked, and clothe you? When did I see you sick or in prison, and come to you? Thirty three years have I looked for you; but I have never seen your face, nor ministered to you my King."*

*He ceased, and the sweet voice came again. And again the maid heard it, very faintly and far away. But now it seemed as though she understood the words: "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me."*

*A calm radiance of joy lighted the pale face of Artaban like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain-peak. One long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips. And his journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. Artaban had found the King.*

Admittedly, Van Dyke takes a somewhat liberal license with the Biblical Story. However, the message is clear. How shall we respond to the gift of Word that comes to us? By receiving the light of Christ into our hearts and sharing that light with others.

*"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Amen.*