

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12**  
**“Presence More Than Presents”**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas Day**  
**January 4, 2015**

Walter Brueggemann has observed that “Matthew is not the first one to imagine three rich wise guys from the East coming to Jerusalem.” (1)

Indeed, Matthew’s story line about the Magi is straight out of today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah 60. Isaiah 60 is a portion of a Jewish poem recited around 580 B.C.E. The poem was birthed among people who had returned from Exile in Babylon to a Jerusalem that looked like a Lego village invaded by a play group of rambunctious two-year-olds. Standing in the midst of the wreckage, a starry-eyed poet lifted up his voice to confront the hopelessness of his people: “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” 600 years before Jesus was born, the poet raised the hopes of the people that the day was surely coming when the stock market would rebound and unemployment rates would plummet and wages would skyrocket, to the end, as the poet says, “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Isaiah 60 was the Magi’s road map, guiding them to Jerusalem. It was their script, dictating that they were to mount camels and bring gifts of precious metal and costly perfume to lay before the king who would initiate the prosperity that would raise Jerusalem from the ruins and make it the envy of all the nations.

But when these wise guys – numbered three by artists and hymn writers although neither Isaiah nor Matthew actually say how many Magi there were and named not by Matthew or Isaiah but in legend as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar—get to Jerusalem and make a stop at the palace to let the current king Herod in on their plans, he is, according to Matthew, “frightened.”

Of course, the king is frightened. Of course, he is threatened by the news that there is a baby being born in *his* city who is going to replace *him* as king and be more successful at bringing prosperity to *his* land than *he* has been. The king’s alarm is as catching as this year’s H2N3 flu virus, and he sets off an epidemic of fear: “all Jerusalem with him” shakes with fever and chills at this news, Matthew tells us. Herod points a trembling finger in the direction of his top advisors and barks, “Get in here, and tell me what all this means!”

It is at this point that the chief priests and scribes nervously clear their throats and say, “Um....um...those Magi are actually using the wrong text, O great king. They are reading from Isaiah, and what they should be reading is Micah: ‘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 Israel.’”

This is odd when one stops to think about it. Instead of a text about bright lights in the big city, Herod’s advisors pull out a text about a little unpretentious town out in the country where sheep outnumber people six to one. A reader’s first thought is that the advisors were trying to placate the king by telling Herod what they thought he wanted to hear, that he had nothing to fear from what was happening, in that little speck of a town out in the boonies, something that they hoped would set his mind at ease and get him off their scholarly backs. But the oddly beautiful thing is that the chief priests and scribes are telling the truth. The oddly beautiful thing is that these Magi absorb the truth of this new text from Micah, and they trade one road map for another without a peep of protest. They go to Bethlehem and seeing the vulnerable child in the arms of his mother, they first drop to their knees, giving him the present of their vulnerable, human selves. It is only after giving him the presence of themselves, it appears, that it occurs to them to open the expensive, glitzy presents of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And, I don’t know, maybe it is just me, but I can almost hear the Magi breathing great, huge, deep sighs of relief as they shove the gold, frankincense and myrrh toward Jesus and shake the oppressive scent of the costly perfume from the folds of their robes and unburden their camels’ backs from the weight of the gold.

Theirs is an act of decluttering the soul in the deepest possible sense.

This is a powerful image of discipleship for the start of this new year, both for Davidson College Presbyterian Church as a congregation of God's people and for us as individual disciples as well.

The image of decluttering the soul, of replacing "presents" for "presence," is an image which fits hand in glove with the 40 Days of Prayer in which our congregation has been engaged since December 1. For those of you who may be hearing about the 40 Days of Prayer for the first time because you are new to the congregation on this first Sunday of 2015, briefly, it is this: because of vacancies in the permanent staff positions for Christian education, youth ministry, and college ministry, and the impending retirement of our fantastic business manager, it seemed right to the Session to develop a new strategic plan for Davidson College Presbyterian Church for the coming 3-5 years through the planning committee. One of the great things is that we have been blessed with phenomenal interim staff people in Leslee, Sonia, and Stephanie; their gifts for ministry have enabled us to be free of nervousness about our present ministries. And so we have been able to begin where churches ought always to begin in any endeavor which they undertake, that is, with prayer.

I hadn't really thought of our 40 Days of Prayer as a process of decluttering our collective congregational soul until I swam in the curative waters of Isaiah 60, Micah 2, and Matthew 2 this week. But, by God's grace, this is how I see it now: we have been praying that God's Holy Spirit might relieve us of the burden of our personal agendas, our personal needs, our personal wants, our personal "I like this" and "I don't like this," in the manner of the Magi's being relieved of their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, so that we can follow Jesus into the world and offer God and our neighbors the greatest gift that there is: simply, the presence of our free, unburdened, vulnerable, human selves.

This process of praying in this manner is proving to be transformative for me. I have been grateful that a number of you have shared with me that this is true for you as well. And if you haven't yet embarked upon this journey of prayer or if you fell off the prayer wagon a few days or weeks ago, then I offer you a gentle invitation to pick up the reins once again, and not to wait but to do it today.

There is an additional and related invitation which I will attach as well, and this one doesn't have to do with our collective discipleship as a congregation-at least in a direct sense-so much as it has to do with how we relate to family, friends, and neighbors in the comings and goings of our daily lives.

There is an Epiphany custom which draws on the story of the Magi. It is an Epiphany chalk house blessing. It begins with the blessing of a piece of chalk for each household in the congregation. On January 6, the feast of Epiphany, those who dwell in the household "chalk the door," remembering what we read in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy: "write [the words of God] on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house...and you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates," mark the top of the door or perhaps a door mat in this way: 20 + C + M + B + 15 (century, cross, Caspar, cross, Melchior, cross, Balthasar, cross, year). After the door is marked, this prayer is prayed: May all who come to this home this year rejoice to find Christ living among us; and may we seek and serve, in everyone we meet, Jesus who is your Incarnate Word, now and forever.

In the beginning of the year, it is a reminder of the best gift that we can give to God and to one another: the gift of our vulnerable, human, holy presence. As the days pass and the image of the chalk fades, our hope is that sign that we have made on the door will have been transferred to our hearts and our habits, that we may be sacraments of love for one another.

"Loving God, bless this chalk, that it may be helpful to your people. Grant that those who write the name of this year and the names of Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, may be freed of all that would keep them from offering a holy presence in the name of Jesus Christ."

As it was with the Magi who exchanged one road map for another in order that they might offer the gift of presence to God, may it be so for us.

1. Walter Brueggemann, "Off by nine miles," *Christian Century*, December 19-26, 15.