

*A sermon given on Christmas Eve 2011  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### ***Christmas Gifts That Baffle and Bless***

A cartoon in last week's New Yorker showed the familiar Christmas scene: Mary, Joseph, and the infant child Jesus, surrounded by resplendent regal characters presenting abundant gifts – large vessels of frankincense and myrrh, and a chest of sparkling gold. Off to the side another small family watches; the father says to the young child, "We got you a dreidel."

A dreidel, at least, would be a sensible gift for a small child. As regards the gifts presented to Jesus, a New York Times article this week opined: "In the history of baffling Christmas presents, none may be stranger than the three gifts of the Magi: gold, frankincense and myrrh." My own family would suggest, to the contrary, that a more baffling Christmas present was one I presented to Tricia a few years ago. It was an 8-inch tall, blue ceramic frog. It is made to hang on the wall. It has a large open mouth, into which you can stick dried flowers. It's really quite charming. I believe the direct quote from one of the boys was, "Dad, what were you thinking?" As on all such occasions, I plead "whimsy." It was a whimsical gift, a flight of fancy. Or maybe it was just plain bad judgment.

I wonder, how about those gifts offered by the Magi to the newborn Christ? Gold, one hears, is appropriate for any occasion. But frankincense and myrrh are hardly helpful gifts for a homeless family with a newborn child. Was it whimsy? A flight of fancy? Plain bad judgment?

This week I read about Jason Eslamieh, a 61-year-old architect in Arizona who was born in Iran. After his uncle and his father were killed there in the 1970's for overly modern views, the young man fled to America. He landed, of all places, in French Lick, Indiana. He learned English. He married a Mormon rancher's daughter. He made a career for himself as campus architect at Arizona State. And now this retired grandfather spends his time cultivating rare plants, and especially frankincense. [*NYTimes*, 12.18.2011, "Frankincense Fit for a King".]

The frankincense shrub is from the eastern Mediterranean. A scrubby, homely looking thing with sparse leaves, small and crinkled. Its bark is papery, like scorched parchment. Its resin, of course, is prized for its fragrance. Ancient Egyptians called this sap "the sweat of the gods, fallen to earth." To dry the sap, grind it, and burn it as incense was to smell divinity itself. Yet the sap is harvested only by making a deep slash into the trunk. No gentle plucking of fruits here, but a harsh and somewhat risky treatment. In its native environs, the frankincense shrub is also collected as firewood. Its seedlings are devoured by marauding goats. It is in constant danger of obsolescence. Jason Eslamieh says he grows frankincense in Arizona because it reminds him of his homeland, and of his father who delighted in gardening. But I wonder if Mr. Eslamieh is also drawn to a plant which produces a beautiful fragrance only after surviving a harsh and risky existence, threatened extinction, and unexpected turns. Such is frankincense; such also is the life he himself has lived.

Myrrh, it turns out, is pretty much the same story. An aromatic red resin from a small, thorny tree that grows in dry, stony soil. The bark is penetrated with a wound; the sap bleeds; the resin dries. From it come perfume, incense, and embalming oils.

Every one of the three gifts in that stable suggests the same notion – that a fragrant or valuable thing is treasured in its most precious form only after some crucible of trial or distress. Gold, shining and pure only after surviving the refiner's fire. Frankincense and myrrh only after the slashing of a trunk, the grinding of resin. A nugget from the blasting heat. Sap from a wound. Something beautiful from something painful. Something strong from something vulnerable. Something destined for eternity from something threatened with obsolescence.

Those gifts recorded in Matthew's gospel provide the commentary upon the holy birth recorded in Luke's gospel. The birth is peaceful and serene and greeted with joy on hillside pastures and in the celestial heavens. The frankincense, gold, and myrrh portend other future realities: wounds, and thorns, and embalming. And because all of that is there at the beginning, the message of Christmas is deeper and truer than all the manufactured cheerfulness surrounding us for the past six weeks. If the Christmas story were contained entirely in happy carols, squeaky clean mangers, and unrelenting good cheer – well then, I imagine we would find it to be beyond belief in more ways than one. It would be scarcely more meaningful or enduring than mall music or the yellow smiley face of yesteryear. For it would have nothing to say to what we know of the realities of life – realities which fit nowhere in the paradigm of Jingle Bells.

This week the nominal end to the Iraq War was greeted by yet more bomb blasts in Baghdad and yet more fatalities. This week a friend named Nina warded off loneliness as she approached the first Christmas since a brain tumor claimed the life of her beloved husband. This week the Laurel School community was shattered by the accidental death of a youthful member. Such realities we bring to the manger tonight, alongside whatever delight and gratitude may be a part of our nativity feast. William Wordsworth penned his sonnet:

*It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,  
The holy time is quiet as a Nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;  
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:*

But Wordsworth concludes his verse with the promise of “*God being with us when we know it not.*” Perhaps, says Marilyn McEntyre, “God may be with us in ways that are even more breathtaking than when we are lifted into the natural happiness of a ‘beauteous evening, calm and free.’” [*Weavings*, vol. XXVII, No. 1, p. 40]

This night is, on its own terms, a “beauteous evening, calm and free,” full of joy and peace, warmth and love. On such a night, the gift of a dreidel might signal delight. The gift of a ceramic frog might, in its own way, be a token of joy. But the gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh remind us that this night is even more. This night of Incarnation declares to us that God is with us – with us in every moment of joy and peace, yes; with us also every moment of anguish and struggle. In the slashing of bark, the refining fires, the embalming oils. In ways even more breathtaking when we know it not, than in the quiet and peaceful ones when we wear it gratefully like a shawl. God is with us, in every time and circumstance.

A couple of weeks ago I had a note from my colleague David Bargetzi, priest at St. Luke's Church on the West Side. The classic December sermon warning against the perils of commercialism is not, says David, a necessary word at St. Luke's. His congregation is apt to have neither credit cards nor cash to entice them into wanton acquisition. However, when he preaches on the Advent Scriptures of Christ's Second Coming, on Advent texts which point to our anxious waiting for Christ to enter into our lives anew – then, says David, then does his congregation lean forward in eager anticipation, with rapt attention and an unaccustomed silence.

May we greet the news of this night with equal intensity and fervor. May we lean forward, in the silence of this night, to claim again for ourselves and for our world, the peace of the hillside, the brilliance of light shattering darkness, the bittersweet newness of an infant's cry. May we know that Incarnation of God's presence to be an enduring one. One which becomes more precious than gold, more fragrant than frankincense, more breathtakingly real to us as we travel through the cares and occupations of our years.

May the blessings of Christ be born anew this night. The blessings of Christmas to you.