

## “Once in a Blue Moon Gifts”

Matthew 2:1-12 (The Wise bring presents and are present)  
I Kings 10 (The Queen of Sheba brings presents and is present)

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In a few days, on December 31<sup>st</sup>, the last day of 2009, in fact the last day of this “aught” decade, we’ll have a full moon. That’s nice, but it’s not just nice--it’s quite special, for it will be what astronomers call a “Blue Moon”--not because it is “blue,” but because it will be the *second* full moon in the month. We also had a full moon on December 2<sup>nd</sup>.

In common parlance the phrase “once in a blue moon” simply refers to something that doesn’t happen very often. Christmas time--both 2000 years ago and today--is filled with “once in a blue moon events.”

We see some people daily, don’t we? Not only those we live with, but also perhaps our neighbors or our mail deliverer or the salesperson where we often get coffee. We see others weekly, maybe at church on Sundays. However, there are some people--even sometimes close relatives-- whom we see only “once in a blue moon.”

Wonderfully, many of us have probably experienced those “blue moon” visits over *these* holidays. John and I are getting together this afternoon with cousins and an aunt and uncle whom we see just every couple years. I need to tell you, given this talk of blue moon events, that all of these relatives we’ll see this afternoon have the last name “Moon”! (However, they are not blue.)

To these “once in a blue moon visits,” we might bring a present, but you and I know that what really communicates our care is our *presence*. Isn’t this especially true across the boundaries of generations and cultures? That your *grandchild* dropped by to say hello, *and stayed a while*, means so much. That our great great uncle wants to come to *our* holiday party and has to travel quite a distance touches us.

I remember a “once-in-a-blue-moon” Thanksgiving dinner our family shared with a Korean American family. Their father was a professor at the seminary where we worked. Although they had been in the United States for decades, they had never cooked a turkey—so they asked that we bring the turkey. I had never thought of turkey as a moveable meat, but carting the bird proved to be no problem at all. Was that Thanksgiving Dinner a huge feast! The turkey looked small in the midst of all the Korean food. And, what fun, to sing and sing and sing—especially to hear the Korean males sing, which they said was their “tradition.” We shared gifts of food—but our presence together fostered a deep bond between our families. I was transformed that Thanksgiving.

If we want to learn about people in cultures different from our own, we go, if we can; we’re present to the other culture. When we go, we’ll probably carry a token, a present, from our own culture, but our very going is the greatest gift.

Traveling, being present and giving presents are things we do at a humble level, one person, one family with another. It’s also what leaders of countries do, as they value each other by traveling to the other leaders and their countries. This has been true throughout human history.

The Bowers Museum in Orange County held a fascinating exhibit about the Queen of Sheba a couple of years ago. The Queen of Sheba is only mentioned briefly in our *Bible*, but whew did that visit spawn legends, a wide variety of legends—within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even Hollywood!

The book in the *Bible* entitled *I Kings*<sup>1</sup> tells an account of the meeting of the Queen of Sheba with the beloved, famous, and wise Jewish King Solomon. The Queen wanted to meet the King, perhaps to see whether he was indeed as wise as the media reports, perhaps to open trade with a whole new region of the world. She and her huge caravan traveled through terrains only camels could travel, bringing spices and gold. As the Queen of Sheba tested Solomon with her own hard questions, or so the legends go, she was impressed—indeed Solomon *was* very wise, she concluded, and the palace he had built was beyond her imagination. She gave Solomon gold, many spices, and precious stones, and he gave her “Whatsoever she asked for.” “*Whatsoever she asked for?*” That’s a fascinating phrase that gives us clues as to why great legends—and Hollywood movies—were made from this brief account in the Bible. After *being present* and giving *presents*, the Queen returned to her country.

That’s about all we know about the Queen of Sheba and her visit to King Solomon.<sup>2</sup> We don’t even know the name of the Queen. There are a few other times that this visit is mentioned in the *Bible*, but none reveal any more information.<sup>3</sup>

You might be thinking, “Pastor Carolyn, did you celebrate a bit too hard over Christmas? What is all this about the Queen of Sheba? After Christmas we think about the Magi and their visit to the little one, Jesus.”

Aha! **If** you were wondering that, you have provided just the transition I need to shift to consider the Magi.

The Magi had a once-in-a-lifetime, not just a once-in-a-blue-moon visit when they went to be *present with* and to bring *presents* to the boy Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Just like the Queen of Sheba, they traveled to the Middle Eastern “holy land” bearing gifts, in order to check out a king.<sup>5</sup> For the Queen of Sheba the king was the wise King Solomon; for the Magi it was the potential messiah.

We are told that the Magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Actually these gifts are probably what the Queen of Sheba brought, for those precious stones, spices and fragrances were especially what the East had to offer.

So the Queen of Sheba and the Magi all traveled *to be present* and brought *presents* to kings—one king was known to be wise, the other’s profound wisdom was yet to be known. The Magi would soon make it known that Jesus was a king, for they (it is emphasized) “*with great joy*”<sup>6</sup> not only “saw” but “recognized” the long-awaited Messiah. They found the young boy, with the aid of the star that went in the opposite direction of natural stars.<sup>7</sup>

The Magi experienced an “epiphany,” that is, they experienced the holy, **and they were transformed**. Once in a blue moon you and I encounter and recognize the holy, we too have “epiphanies,” **and we’re transformed**. And, these epiphanies sometimes happen when we give or are given the gift of presence by another or to another. Holy encounters often occur between people who are different in seemingly big ways, for the very difference jogs insights, wonder, and self-reflection--spiritual growth.

Presence and presents--especially those which occur “once in a blue moon”--transcend languages, generations, and cultures—are unspoken ways of saying, “I care.”

“I’m here.” “I value you.” The Magi and the holy family and King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba didn’t need to speak the same languages to recognize what was being communicated. Heart-felt *presents and presence* lead to epiphanies and personal transformations.

Since I’ve been your pastor, several of you have wondered aloud about how we Christians relate to people of other faiths.

When there’s a big lopsidedness in the number of those from different faiths in a community, it is typical for the group with the largest majority to act as if all in that community are of that faith. Those in Redlands who are not Christian may feel that we Christians act as if ours is the only faith at Christmastime.

I was raised in the San Fernando Valley in the late ‘50’s and early ‘60’s. In my high school classes I, as a Christian, was in the minority. Therefore, I learned a huge amount about Jewish holidays. In Japan even if you’re Christian, you’re guaranteed to learn about Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> When there is big lopsidedness in numbers, all have to work hard not to lose the presents those in the minority faiths bring by their presence.<sup>9</sup> When people who represent different faiths come together or live together in a community, one option is that we try to diminish their religious identities, so that their distinctiveness is not names aloud. There is a pretense of sameness. Another option is that we try to find some very basic common ground between ourselves--such as “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”--the Golden Rule.

Not naming our particularities or finding a very basic similarity are sometimes useful approaches to our interfaith interactions. However, when we only do this, we all (Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish) lose our valuable particularities which could actually be of benefit to each other.<sup>10</sup> If we encounter each other in all of our differences, as the wise ones approached their new experience, we just might have epiphanies and be transformed by our encounters.

Voila! *The Magi’s experience may be a guide for us wise ones as we interact with those of other faiths.*<sup>11</sup> *The Magi were transformed when they encountered the Christ.* In fact, they didn’t fulfill their mission, to go back to Herod. They went home another way. **They evidently also went home different than they came.** Isn’t this exactly what the Messiah, Jesus, did himself and what he taught others to do when we encounter those of other cultures and religions?

I’ve known several married couples who maintain their own faith identities, but were transformed by the gifts of the others’ sharing their faith over the years. John’s aunt was Roman Catholic and his uncle was United Methodist for their 62 years of marriage. Their marriage was very strong and they both respected each others’ faith and each others involvement in their respective churches. I know other couples in which one is Buddhist and the other Christian. They enrich each other and are ripe for epiphanies as they truly encounter each other openly.

Truly out of the blue I received a card this year from a woman who was in a couple of my seminary classes. I recall her vividly because I was at first intimidated by her. She is a physician, even a psychiatrist. On her recent card she made some comment about my influence upon her. I was stunned. The whole time I related to her, I felt I had virtually nothing to give. It was an “epiphany” to me that she perceived I offered her any gift.

I'm sure there are many people whom I consider huge gifts in my life who do not grasp their significance for me. I have told a few of you--mostly those in your 90's--that you are role models for me, and you usually act as if I'm crazy. But I'm honest. You transform me by your presence. Our presence here, with each other, is a gift we give to each other, in any phase of the moon. We give each other many more presents than we dream we do, as we interact, laugh, tell stories, and have epiphanies.

This Christmas I was so appreciative of two phone calls and several cards from people who contacted me "out of the blue." I urge you to follow any nudge, when you think of someone, to make contact. Your presence--even on the phone or in writing--is a present.

The magi symbolize how people can be affected by each other when they are open to genuine encounters. They were transformed. Transformations may be greatest when the encounters are as infrequent as two full moons in a month. As we close 2009, we might find blessings as we look back to reflect upon those who have transformed us in some way because we were open to a genuine encounter with them. As we anticipate a whole new decade, we might reflect upon how open we are to being transformed and to hanging in there with those who seem different in some way--knowing that they just may be transformed by our presence.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 10

<sup>2</sup> The biblical account is portrayed as "an exceptional exchange of riches as well as a tantalizing exchange of riddles, and serves to underline the wisdom, might and legitimacy of Solomon as King of Israel." Bowers' book

<sup>3</sup> Almost the exact story is told in 2 Chronicles 9 and there are tiny allusions to this event in Matthew 12:42, Luke 11:31 and Psalm 72.

<sup>4</sup> It seems Matthew composed his story from those traditional materials, recasting it in his own style...

<sup>5</sup> The wise men magi represent pagans, gentiles, non-Jews who come to Jerusalem following the light they have seen...their goal is to pay homage, worship the new king

They have seen a star "in the east" Gk phrase means either that or "at its rising"

The Magi were in the east (the star was not)...and followed the star in the western sky to Beth...

All natural heavenly bodies appear to move east to west...so this star moving westward then southwestward wasn't natural...

Star important to both Jews who expected Messiah to come from star out of Jacob and gentiles' beliefs with astral phenomenon...sort of a bridge...binding both pagan view and Jewish bibl promise

<sup>6</sup> Who else in the bible is said to have such great joy? The merchant who is in search of fine pearls is said to have great joy in finding them 13:45 AND THE WOMEN at the tomb of Jesus are said to have great joy on Easter morning 28:

<sup>7</sup> Bowers book explains the direction of stars and the direction of the stated direction of this one, and there can't be any identification of this star with known natural astrological events.

<sup>8</sup> So, what often occurs is that  $a + b + c = a$ . That is, all the cultures tend to be like the most powerful culture. That's assimilation

<sup>9</sup> There are two more options, though. One option is referred to as "cultural pluralism"—where  $a + b + c = a + b + c$ . That is, all cultures might worship entirely by themselves, maintaining their own cultural songs, theologies, prayers... WE all stay the same as we were...unaffected by the presents we may have for each other

<sup>10</sup> Sometimes when there are three cultures, say a, b, and c, all three are lost to a great extent and a fourth one, d emerges. That's called "amalgamation."

<sup>11</sup>  $A + B + C$  equals A transformed; B transformed; C transformed...cite resource for this  $a + b + c$  analysis