

## A Gift of Love to Share

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle

The Epiphany of our Lord. 1-6-2019 1-5-2020

**Scripture:** Matthew 2:1-12

*“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage. 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*6 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 my people Israel.*

*7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage. 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”*

**Sermon:** The God whose love fills all of creation came into the world as a baby. Why? Isn't creation itself gift enough? Isn't this miraculous thing we call Life gift enough? Why does it take a gift of love in human form meant for the whole world, revealed by a star seen by all, even by foreign king's from a land far, far away?

Herod's reaction to the gift provides a big clue. He's afraid, and "all of Jerusalem" is shakin' in their boots. Herod's own power is based on fear, as is the power of all tyrants. The law and order he maintains as a client king under the Pax Romana is based on fear of his authority to punish, which is the case for all human empires even that of our own country. For the Magi bring news out of nowhere of

a new king, a king who will mess with Herod's authority and threaten empire's law and order.

How many of you have read Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" and/or seen the musical? I think this beautiful story is very much about our human law and order vs. God's justice of mercy and compassion. If you haven't yet read or seen this story, I need to issue a spoiler alert. I'll try to not give too much away.

The two main characters are a fugitive, Jean Valjean, and a police officer, Javert, obsessed with capturing him. Jean Valjean's life began in the miserable conditions of poverty that forced him to steal food, a loaf of bread, for his sister's dying son. He was convicted and spent years in jail for this petty crime. After completing his sentence, Inspector Javert bids him goodbye with the warning that he better not break his parole or he'll dedicate his life to tracking him down.

Taken in by a bishop in a monastery, Valjean almost immediately breaks parole by stealing silver from the monastery. But the bishop shows Jean Valjean compassion and mercy. He tells the police who arrested Valjean that he gave him the silver. It's a gift of mercy that changes Valjean's life. He begins his life anew dedicated to sharing and passing on to others the gift he has received, trying his best to show mercy and compassion to all.

Inspector Javert doesn't care that Valjean has changed. His whole world is based on living under the authority of laws that punish to keep the order. Over the next seventeen years, their paths cross several times, with Valjean eluding Javert's capture. Through a series of events, the tables are turned and Inspector Javert's life is put into Valjean's hands. Javert is at his mercy now. Valjean could easily kill him, but instead, he passes on the gift of mercy to Inspector Javert and releases him. Javert's eyes are opened to a new world revealed to him through Valjean, a world based on compassion and mercy. Could he leave behind his world of strict law and order? Could he even conceive of living in a world of mercy and compassion?

Several of the most moving songs in Les Miserables are prayers to God. Valjean prays in the monastery after receiving his gift of mercy. He prays later in requesting mercy for others. What makes the gift of mercy most special to him is a life of sharing it with others. Inspector Javert also has a majestic song praying to god while on a rooftop high above the city. He's praying from the heady heights to a god who keeps law and order, who provides the authority for him to be an enforcer. It's striking. There could hardly be two more different gods: Valjean's God of mercy and compassion, and Javert's God of wrathful punishment.

Here's the million-dollar question: Does the true God who gives the gift of Jesus to the world resemble either of these two gods? Or is the true God somehow both: the wrathful God who stands behind our human justice system, and the merciful and compassionate God who sometimes subverts our law and order?

For centuries the Church has told us: “both.” There’s the wrathful face of god whose justice demands punishment and whose wrath must be satisfied. The death of everyone in the whole world wouldn’t be enough to satisfy this god’s wrath and bring justice, because our sin is just too great. But there’s also the merciful face of God who sent Jesus, the sinless one, to propitiate God’s own wrath meant for us. The cross is like the bishop’s act in *Les Miserables*. Those who believe in that mercy can count on not having to die under eternal condemnation from God’s wrath. They can appreciate the mercy of that act and share the gift by telling others and helping them believe for eternal life. This should all sound pretty familiar. It is the quintessential American Christianity. We worship Janus, the two-faced god.

The main problem with this understanding though is that the wrathful face of god really mirrors our own human way of keeping order, and not necessarily God’s way mirrored for us in the gift of Jesus. If we stick with the story of *Les Miserables*, we see in Jean Valjean a true conversion to the way of mercy and compassion within this life. The gift of mercy that he receives isn’t just something nice to stick in his back pocket until judgment day and to give him comfort for the afterlife. No. Valjean takes that gift of mercy and compassion as the Way to live in this life under all circumstances, even when faced with his enemy who would imprison or kill him. Jean Valjean lived his life like Jesus.

Valjean and Javert represent the choices we all face. Can we live in a world of mercy and compassion? Or do we continue to live under condemnation in this world because, despite Jesus’ example, we just can’t let go of our wrath and desire for punishment?

I think a big part of why so many young people have left the church is that many Christians are more like Javert, hanging on to a God of wrath and law and order. They see so called Christians who really serve Janus, the two-faced god, who’s merciful to those who believe a certain way, and wrathful to the rest. What they don’t see in us is a Jesus who lives the way of mercy and compassion, even to our enemies.

But we are slowly changing. If we look at Javert as representing a system with no compassion, Jesus’ way of love and mercy is evidenced in a system that now offers treatment, a way to healing, rather than always meting out punishment. Peace officers work for departments of public safety, not to be feared, but to serve with compassion.

So, back to our first question: Why does the God whose love fills all of creation need to come into our world through a small baby? Why does it take a gift of love in human form meant for the whole world, revealed by a star that can be seen by all, even by foreign king’s from a land far, far away?

I think it's because we humans have this sinful problem with idolatry. We create our own gods of wrath to justify our own systems of retributive law and order. "Well, God's like that," we say, "so we can be, right?" Remember What I've been saying: what our God looks like directly influences our ethics. And the only way the loving Creator of heaven and earth could break through our stubborn idolatry was to send the divine in the gift of a precious baby, who grew up for a showdown with our law and order system. God knew this showdown would break Jesus' bones and spill his blood and finally murder him. God did this in order to raise Jesus again to redeem us all from our human-made, wrathful system of law and order. Jesus' death and resurrection bring us God's way to maintain order based on a power other than violent force. It's the power of love; it's the power of mercy; it's the power of compassion that's bringing all of Creation into harmony. It's the gift of forgiveness that can even redeem our idolizing of wrath.

My friends, we're called to follow the Magi in responding to this gift. We're called to be not like Javert, but like Jean Valjean, who takes this gift of incredible mercy and compassion and shares it with others, even his enemy.

Amen!?

### **Children's Message**

Discuss best Christmas gifts with children.

What makes a gift the best? Is it the ones that cost the most? The ones we use or play with the most? The most fun?

How about the one we share the most with others? [Use cards with key words on it: Cost, Play/Use, Fun, Share.]

The Magi (Wisemen) brought the first Christmas gifts to the baby Jesus. They celebrated the gift of God's love, Jesus, that God was sharing with the whole world. It is a gift that we can share with others, too.

So, I think the best gifts are those we give away to make others happy, like God's gift of Jesus to us.

### **Source:**

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