

Sermon Notes for The Second Sunday of Christmas

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#) / [Psalm 84 or 84:1-8](#) / [Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a](#) / [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

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In the Bleak Midwinter

It's often around New Year's that I start to become a bit melancholic. Maybe it has something to do with the empty space under our Christmas Tree, or the appearance of the trees curbside awaiting pick-up. Today is the ninth day of Christmas, yet much of the world has moved well beyond Christmastide, New Year's festivities are winding down, and what may seem like a slog into January lies ahead of us. It's typical after holidays for many of us to feel a bit down, with the mystery gone, the presents opened, the fervor of the festivities behind us. I suppose it may be a bit like Mary and Joseph waking up one morning and realizing the awesome responsibility of parenthood, the long, sometimes seemingly endless, sleep-deprived nights a newborn brings. Adding to the stress of their story, this past week we recalled the Holy Innocents – one part of the nativity narratives that have the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt to escape the horrific machinations of King Herod as he brooks no rival. And we thought our post-Christmas blues were bad enough!

Our carol, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, reminds me of this time of year. Maybe we don't have frosty winds, but we have bone-chilling damp cold that this time of year often brings. The kids must get up early again for school, work routines gear up for a New Year, we scramble here in the parish and in the our lives in the wider world to button down business from the old year. Jesus' birth has come in the midst of this, and remains with us even as the tinsel comes down, the decorations are tucked away, and we seem to struggle with the same troubles we had before Christmas. Yet part of me struggles with the question every year – Why aren't things different – or at least more different – after Christmas? My expectations have not been met in some fashion or another. Wasn't the Messiah's birth supposed to end the arduous slog of this life?

Meanwhile, we recall today the wise men make their journey following a star. They, too, must deal with Herod's scheming, weighing the suspicions of their host against the inspiration of light that draws them to the Christ child. For them and for us, the world continues in its usual pattern. The angels might be whispering to Joseph and Mary, but gone are the glorious visions of shepherds and the inspirations of praise. In their place, we have the fragile, flickering light of a star, the light of hope that beckons the wise men and us through the long journey to the manger,

the journey towards Epiphany. We reckon during this journey with the all the business-as-usual that re-enters our lives and threatens like a storm cloud to cover that fragile light of hope and truth the Christ child has brought. We may feel at times we have to fight for a glimpse of the star to keep ourselves properly oriented, we may need to struggle to find the hope that Christmas brought – or that we thought Christmas was meant to bring.

But it is the wise men who teach us how to approach this journey, melancholic or not, struggling as we do with the unmet expectations and the long paths before us guided by the flickering light of a distant star.

They bring gifts to the manger rather than expectations. Theirs are the kingly kind: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They give, pay homage, and then return to their home country, to their regular lives. Can we suppose that they are transformed? Dare we assume that they will bring the story of this mystery to far away peoples? The gap the author of Matthew leaves us with leaves much left to wonder and has sparked numerous stories in popular culture, art, and longstanding legend about these mysterious travelers from the East.

On the other hand, Matthew reminds us with the uncanny silence about the future paths of the wise men that the Gospel focus is not on what they or we “get” out of Christmas, with our encounter with the Christ Child in the sometimes bleak midwinter – whether gifts, happiness, changed lives, or whatever expectations we might bring this year or any year.

Rather, the focus is on what is given.

Instead of coming to the Christ child this time of year seeking satisfaction for our desires, we are called to give to him. And although most of us do not possess treasure fit perhaps for a king – for few of us have much gold, frankincense, or myrrh close at hand – we give something far more precious and ultimately life-changing. A gift not fit, indeed, for a temporal king of the world, but one that is fit for a ruler of heaven, of earth, of Creation, of life itself.

The beloved carol sums up our call in late Christmastide so humbly and so succinctly:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him:

Give my heart.