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So...the last dregs of Christmas. Here it is. The last day where we celebrate this wonderful season. You know, we really drag it out around here because we have to celebrate the Epiphany and so even though the Epiphany is technically on the sixth, we have to celebrate it, so we celebrate it on the tenth and we get to have the greens up one more Sunday. You probably packed yours up at home already, huh?

It's fitting because in the story of course the wise wintered late. I guess they had a long way to travel. In Matthew's account the holy family are in a house now; they are no longer in a cave.

We're flooded right now. We're physically flooded, many of us. People are pumping out basements and trying to get cleaned up. We're flooded with bad news of all sorts—of economic meltdown, of terrible violence in Gaza. And in the midst of this dark and rainy season, it can be pretty easy to feel overwhelmed by all the bad news.

And in the midst of this, the celebration of Epiphany comes. With the supposed magi, wise ones, and you gotta wonder: How wise were they really?

When you think about it, they were at least a little bit naïve, for instance, to go marching into Herod's court. He was a well-known, jealous, bloody despot. I mean, he's no fictional character. He's a real, live guy and he was a real, live **bad** guy. Known for knocking off his enemies. Known for being a megalomaniac. And they walked right in and tell him they're looking for another king. Now how wise is that? They're lucky he didn't off them right there and then, but he had his motives and he sent them out as his spies.

And then when they go out and look for this supposed king, they go to a humble home of a carpenter. How wise is that? Is that where people find kings normally? And then think about the gifts they brought. I mean, really, for a baby: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. [When] I'm going to a baby shower, I bring diapers if I'm really practical or, you know, some really cute, cuddly stuffed animal or something useful.

So on the surface they don't look so smart. But, of course, we know that the gifts that they brought were more about Matthew's desire to show us who Jesus is than about bringing mere bottles of pleasure or comfort for a baby. These gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh traditionally have been associated with the symbols for royalty, divinity, and ultimately suffering. Gold for a king, frankincense for a God, myrrh an embalming spice for one who dies.

Jesus' story from the very beginning is about hidden riches. The wisdom of the wise ones is not on the surface. The wisdom of the wise ones goes much deeper. To those things which are invisible. To those things that do not appear so smart on the surface. They know the deep truth. The deep truth of Jesus' true identity, or at least they seek

that identity and they're willing to go through a great deal of trouble and danger in order to encounter it.

These hidden riches, a king in a stable, a God on the cross.

As we mine the story, we discover God's gifts to us also in troubling times. The gold the Magi give honor a king, but that king turns around and tells us we too are of a royal family. That king turns around and teaches us to call God Abba. Not just Father—that's the Aramaic familiar term for Father, more like, Daddy. So that we have become brothers and sisters, children of God. Heirs according to the promise as Paul said.

The frankincense, which is meant to be burned as incense as a sign of prayer that Matthew used to point to Jesus' divine nature points to God in flesh incarnate. That incarnate one gifts us with the Holy Spirit that we might live out our lives as the body of Christ, as God's loving presence in the world so we might live lives of mission and service and self-giving.

And myrrh, which is the gift that prepares him for death. This one who dies, whose life is so caught-up in his destiny to die shows us that the way of the cross is the way of life. That even in the midst of suffering and maybe *especially* in the midst of suffering we can find doorways to new life, to resurrection.

By letting go and going deeper into the spiritual resources of gratitude and faith and hope and generosity - which aren't that important in good times, are they? But when things start falling apart, that's when we learn, that's when we discover, when we open ourselves to those gifts. How to be people of depth and richness.

It's times like these I sometimes wish I had a personal refresh button. You know, I love that thing on the computer where you go and you get a new screen. Yea, refresh! Whoosh. It's like I need to reset my mentality because as I become inundated as we have been with all the bad news of the floods and the wars and the economy, it's easy to go into a place of fear and anxiety that's hard to emerge from. The repetitive and intrusive voices of media and experience seem to put us in a frame of mind that it's hopeless and anxious.

I have a wise counselor who has done a lot to help me get through the winters. I have some depression. I have a good, a good friend and a counselor and he talks to me. He was talking to me this week about how hard it is to change our emotion. You know, you can't just sit there and say now I'm going to feel good. I don't like feeling bad so now I'm going to feel good. I mean, you know, you don't just change how you feel. And he says it isn't all that easy to change how you think though you can.

There are three components to the way we function in terms of mental health and I think it has a lot of parallels with spiritual health. He says there's the emotional realm and the realm of thoughts and there's the realm of action. And changing your thoughts is a way to help change your actions but it's—I mean, your feelings. If you change how you

perceive a situation or how you think about it, it can impact how you feel. But he said that's even hard to do.

The easiest, most changeable thing we can do is change our action. Choose our actions. And that goes back to the whole basic Christian idea of spiritual practice. We have to practice the truth. When we are living with pervasive fear or grief or doubt or anxiety we have to practice entering into something deeper and more sustaining. And one of the practices we use is to walk into a room like this and sit in a pew and look up at this altar that reminds us that God is with us. And we literally go up and put bread and wine in our mouth to remind us that God is not just with us but in us and feeding us and living through us. And we come and hear to go alongside the other stories which we cannot ignore, we must not ignore at our peril.

Jesus never calls us to close our eyes to the suffering of the world or to our own suffering. These are things we must confront, but confront with compassion and hope. And in order to be able to do that we put alongside the stories of our experience the stories of those who have gone before. The Magi who looked in a plain little carpenter's house for a king, who were able to risk and go through the expense of traveling hundreds and hundreds of miles through a desert coming through the court of a despot and going home by another way. We come and we hear these stories so that we can see our story in it, we can place our story within the larger story and find meaning and hope to carry on.

Sometimes I think that prayer is the ultimate refresh button. Just the simple action of taking a deep breath and acknowledging that we are not alone and entrusting ourselves to a higher power. That action alone changes our perspective.

So that in the midst of these wild times, I find I need to do this more and more, put myself in places hope is practiced, put myself in places where trust in God and trust in community and trust in life are celebrated. And whether that's here or Sunday evening or Wednesday—you know, every Wednesday I say: I wish I could bottle this so I could show it to you and give it to you on Sunday morning—what happens on Wednesday is so very, very sweet. We have the most lovely Eucharist and community. And somehow in the middle of the week it is the nicest thing. And then we eat together. And it's, it is so fine. It is so very fine. In the dark winter, to come out in the night and be together like that is a really wonderful thing. I'm selling it. I...honestly selling! But even those places where we go alone to take the deep breath and connect and put ourselves in those hopeful places.

We can do it without having to make a long journey to Bethlehem. We can do it without having to brave a vicious tyrant. We can encounter the Christ who is with us at this table, in this pew, or in our own quiet places of prayer. And when we return to those places we receive in return gifts of true wealth and wonder that sustain us and refresh us.

Amen.