

# EVERYTHING

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A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie Nagley on  
January 10, 2016 at St. Luke's Bethesda, Maryland  
Matthew 2:1-12  
"Journey of the Magi" by T. S. Eliot

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it.

That is the beginning of O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi". Many of you know that classic reading it for the first time as part of a middle school English literature class. That's how I remember it. The story was published first in 1905 in The New York Times and the story continues as Della dries her tears and puzzles over what she is going to buy her husband Jim for Christmas with \$1.87.

Jim made \$20 a week and she had saved everything she could but even back then \$20 didn't go far. It seemed no matter how hard she tried the expenses always exceeded her hopes for savings. Their income was meager but they had two prize possessions: Della's long beautiful hair and Jim's shiny gold pocket watch that belonged to his father and grandfather.

She so wanted to buy her beloved Jim something extra special this Christmas "something fine and rare and sterling --- something a little bit near being worthy of the honor of being [with Jim]".

A couple of more tears fell on the red carpet and then Della through on her worn brown coat and put on her old brown hat.

She ran down the sidewalk to the store where they bought hair. Della took out the pins that held her hair and the brown waves of it fell to her knees. Twenty dollars, offered the proprietor and off came her hair.

With the \$20 dollars Della ran to the next store to buy a simple platinum watch chain and fob for Jim's watch. A chain and fob like no other.

She ran home with 87 cents left over to ready their Christmas Eve dinner.

When Jim got home he stared at her. Her beautiful hair was gone. He was stunned, speechless.

He reached in his coat pocket and pulled a package. Open it, he told her.

Della tore into the paper. Jim's gift to her was a set of hair combs for beautiful flowing locks. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. Combs she had worshipped in one of the store windows for a very long time.

They were expensive combs and now, they were hers.

Della held out her hand with his beautiful watch chain and fob. She said, "Give me your watch and let's see how it looks." Instead, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

O. Henry concludes the story writing, "The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones..."

"I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.

But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi".

On this Sunday after the Epiphany we are celebrate the discovery of the birth of the Messiah by the Magi. They went to Bethlehem on the demand of an earthly king. King Herod ordered them go because he was told a king had been born and that just wouldn't do.

The Magi may have gone with some fear of what that king might do to them if they didn't go and perhaps out of greed for the money or position or power they might gain if they did the king's bidding.

What they didn't expect was to discover love, the kind of love that is more powerful than any earthly king and more rich than any earthly kingdom.

What they didn't expect was that they would give up everything for the sake of love.

Love is the only thing I can think of that will cause us to give up everything for the sake another. Love is the only thing I can think of that will make us choose a path that will let us discover more life than we have known. Love is the only I know that will make us choose to give up everything with a smile on our face and joy in our hearts.

The gospel and e poem by T.S. Eliot tells us that once the Magi found that love that couldn't go back to the way things had always been. They had to go home by a different road.

That's our destiny, too. We're called to follow another path. We are called to deny and defy the Herods of this world and take the road of wisdom, love and compassion.

The Herods of this world are many and manifest. Herod is quite loud this year in the presidential campaign. The bellicose and belligerent voices of those who flame the fear of desperate people with rhetoric that vilifies Muslims and Jews and anyone else who is different than they. The Herods of this world whose solution to a problem is to buy more guns or put up bigger fences, or blow up a country or build a better bomb. The Herods of this world say the sky is falling but can't see the puddle of water forming at their feet because the earth is getting too warm and the ice cap is melting.

Herod lives on the big stage but exists in small places, too. Herod sets up shop in our hearts easily enough. Herod is present when fear takes over our imaginations. Herod steals our joy. Herod is cynical, pessimistic, fearful, greedy, and quick to blame the other. Herod is the voice that says we're unworthy.

The alternative road, the road the wise men chose, the way of Della and Jim, the way of Jesus is a path that asks us to give everything for the sake of love. The alternative road is a people who decide to give everything to God realizing that in the birth of Jesus God gave us God's very self.

God didn't hold back and so why should we. Is there anything to be gained, really gained, in not giving God every ounce of our souls? Is there anything, really anything to be gained by holding back or holding to those things that hold us down? Is there anything to be gained by living in the old

dispensations, to continue living by letting fear overrule our dreams, or letting poor health define our days, or letting pessimism and cynicism be the first thoughts of the morning? Is there anything to be gained by saying "we believe" and then acting as if we're not sure at all?

A friend of mine tells the story of going to his spiritual director who happened to be a Carmelite nun. He was in one of his hand wringing, mustache tugging modes about the meaning of life and whether or not God existed and what difference would it make and if it made difference what should he do about and on and on. Sister Marie just listened. It wasn't as if she hadn't heard it all before from others and she had been around this same barn with my friend a hundred times. Finally, when he drew, she looked down at her sandaled feet --- Carmelite nuns are a descaled order which means they gave up shoes for God and so maybe you could say they gave their souls for God. She said, "Blayne, do you want to know what God wants from you? And then she laughed, that open kind of laugh where you could see the missing molars and said, "God wants everything".

God wants everything. That's not to say that God will love us any less if we hold back. But, I think, it is to say that God exists in the endless hope that one day we'll decide God is worth everything and go toward God is the answer to our lives and what we're doing here and how we best respond to our circumstances. To give everything to God and for God is our gift, the gift of the magi.

That's not to say what is asked of us is easy. O. Henry's Della spilled a lot of tears on before she cut her hair and Jim no doubt cried when he gave up his watch. T. S. Eliott's magi traveled at the worst time of year with complaining camels, refractory and sore footed. They came to the baby and realized that their life was forever changed. Their life as they need it was over but a new life was born that asked them to go another way and for that death and life they were strangely glad.

I don't have any illusions that you or I will go the way of God perfectly. I think we will always be perfectly imperfect. But I do expect us to try. I do expect us to take the time to remember, more often than not, the manger and the gift of Jesus; the manger where God's gift was to put Godself into our hands so that we might see what we could do together to fulfill the dream of a world where Herods no longer rule.

I think it helps to remember that God gave us everything and in the remembering we find the courage to choose another a new dispensation.