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## Our Gift to God

--KatherineFeng20250105--

Welcome to our service on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas.

As I was preparing for today's sermon, the visit of the wise men from the East to the baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem reminded me a movie I watched many years ago. The movie is called <The 4<sup>th</sup> Wise Man>. I don't know how many of you have seen that movie. This movie was based on a book named <The Other Wise Man>, written by a Presbyterian pastor Henry Van Dyke in 1896.

In the movie, Artaban, a Persian magi who was young and wealthy and recently lost his wife and son in a tragic fire, saw the rising star in the sky and recognized in it the sign of the birth of king of the Jews. He then sold all his possessions and purchased three valuable gems including a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl and planned to go on a journey with 3 other wisemen together to pay homage to the newborn king, a king described in his own words as the one "will govern the entire world as one family" and "will give his life true meaning and purpose".

Artaban and his servant Orante rode on horses for 9 days in the wilderness without breaks in order to meet with the rest of the pilgrims on the 10<sup>th</sup> day to leave for Israel together. As they were approaching the meeting point, an old and injured man appeared in the middle of the road and asked for help. Artaban stopped for this stranger, because there was no one else there could save him. So, he treated the injured man with some herbal medicine and took him to an inn.

This injured man turned out to be a Jew. After being rescued and feeling better, this injured man told Artaban that according to the prophecy, the Messiah of the Jews won't be born in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem of Judea. Then, Artaban left all his bread and water to the injured man and headed on his way again meet with his team.

Because of this delay, Artaban and his servant arrived too late and missed his team. At that point, he had only enough money for him and his servant to return home in Persia. But, Artaban was determined see the King, so he sold the sapphire, one of his three precious gifts for the king, to buy camels and assemble caravan to cross the desert Bethlehem to look for the king of kings on his own.

By the time Artaban and his servant arrived in Bethlehem, the holy infant had already been born in a manger, the three wise men he missed at the meeting point had already given their precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the newborn king, and Joseph had already taken Mary and baby Jesus on a donkey fleeing to Egypt after being warned by an angel of the Lord in his dream.

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What's worse was the slaughter of babies under the age of two in the city ordered by King Herod took place. In order to save a baby boy from being killed, Artaban gave his ruby to an armed captain as a bribe. At this point, Artaban missed the baby Jesus and his family and gave away the 2<sup>nd</sup> piece of his three precious gifts for the king.

Artaban did not give up. He headed to Egypt with his servant and continued to search for Jesus. But, several years passed, he still didn't find Jesus. Then one day when Artaban was talking to a rabbi about his searching journey, the rabbi told him not to look for Jesus in palaces and temples or mansions of the rich, but to look for him in the hobbles of the oppresses, because according to prophet Isaiah, the Messiah of Israel especially love the poor and oppressed and he will be living among them. Therefore, Artaban decided to leave Egypt and go back to Israel to look for Jesus.

On his way to Israel, Artaban was robbed. His pearl, the last gift he had for Jesus, was taken by two robbers. So, he chased the robbers and went into a village inhabited by lepers and people who were blinded and disabled. Out of his compassion, Artaban gave treatment to some of the sick people. As an appreciation, the robbers returned the pearl to him. However, instead of leaving immediately to continue his search journey for Jesus, Artaban decided to stay for one more day to help more people.

Then, an extra day turned to a week, a month, a year, and a much longer time. With his love and courage, Artaban stayed in the colony of beggars and restlessly healed one patient after another among these outcasts and sinners. He also taught the recovered people farming and other skills, so that they could make a living instead of begging and robbing people.

In one of the letters his servant wrote to Artaban's father, it says "He works morning, night, noon and his sleep always interrupted by another cry of pain. In this world of anguish, he finds many to help but none to follow. It seems he has completely forgotten his quest. He has changed completely. Rather than being able to elevate these disease-ridding creatures, he has become one of them."

After taking care of the poor and the sick for over 3 decades, Artaban was exhausted and seriously ill. Knowing it would be impossible for him to travel and seek Jesus in his age and health condition, Artaban freed his servant and offered to sell the pearl, the last piece of his valuable gift the King for the sake of restoring the village that was burnt down by their enemies.

When Artaban's servant went to Jerusalem as a free man with a blind village, they saw people shouting "Hosana in the Highest" and welcoming Jesus of Nazareth into the city. The servant returned to the village right away and told the good news to Artaban. So, after 33 years of searching and longing, Artaban dragged his old and sick body and set off for Jerusalem. He was going to finally meet Jesus and to personally dedicate his only remaining treasure, the pearl that kindly saved by the villagers, to the king of his life.

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Unfortunately, by the time Artaban arrived in Jerusalem, Jesus had been taken to Pontius Pilate and was about to be executed for proclaiming himself the Son of God. On the good Friday, Artaban struggled to follow Jesus as he carried his cross to Calvary outside of the city, hoping that he might be able to pay the pearl as a price to stop the execution.

While he had to stop in the middle to catch his breath, a little girl was captured by soldiers and to be sold into slavery to repay her father's debt. Artaban debated very hard in his heart and then gave up his pearl to the soldiers as a ransom for the girl to be set free.

When the little girl left in safety, Artaban saw from a distance that Jesus had been nailed to the cross and raised up. He then heard Jesus crying his last words saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" and then "Father, into your hands I command my spirit". with the strongly blowing wind and violently shaken earth, the king that Artaban searched all his life died on the cross and he had lost all the gifts he prepared for his king.

After the death and burial of Jesus, Artaban was in the last days of his life. As his life was slipping away, Jesus suddenly appeared to him in glory. Artaban was surprised to see the resurrected Lord. He said to Jesus, "Master, I have long sought you. Forgive me, once I had precious gifts to give, now I have nothing." Jesus replied: "Artaban, you have already given your gifts to me."

Artaban said: "Lord, I don't understand." Then, Jesus said: "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. When I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, When I was naked you clothed me, when I was homeless you took me in." Artaban said: "Not so, my savior. I never saw you hungry, nor thirsty. I never clothed you and I never brought you into my home. I have never seen you until now." Then Jesus replied: "Whatever you did these things for the least of my brothers, you did them for me."

Hearing these words, Artaban burst into tears and died peacefully knowing that he has found the king and the king has accepted all his gifts. At the end of the movie, Artaban's servant buried him near the tomb where Jesus was laid and went back to the colony of the beggars and take on Artaban's mission to serve the many there who need help.

Artaban may be not as well-known as the wise men we heard from today's Gospel and his gifts are not as famous as the ones recorded in the Bible and remembered by many. But the sapphire, the ruby, and the pearl he gave up for the sake of saving others are not less valued than the gold, the frankincense, and the myrrh that had been giving to the baby Jesus. The sacrifice Artaban had made to those people he met on his pilgrimage are the best way to worship God and his love and charity to others are the best gifts he could offer to Lord Jesus.

We may not have valuable gifts like the wise men had, but each of us must have something good

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and unique to give to God and his kingdom. And each of us surely can do a lot of good deeds to love our God and to love our neighbors. Jesus said, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me”. Therefore, any gesture of generosity we make towards those who are poor and desperate is a gesture of our love towards our Lord Jesus. And we are promised of the inheritance of God’s kingdom when we feed the hungry and thirsty, when we cloth the naked, and when we visit the ones in prison.

The Book of Micah says “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?.....He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6: 6-8).

Jesus, the one and only Son of God, had come to the world and acted justly, loved mercy, walked humbly among us, and offered his best gift to the whole world. Artaban, the fourth wise man, also acted justly, loved mercy, walked humbly on his search journey, and offered his best gift to the Lord Jesus.

It is nice if we all have a clear map in our hands and go on the faith journey with companions and know in certainty what to do or what not to do. But, a lot of times we find ourselves walking alone on our way to search God feeling lonely and uncertain, we sometimes feel sorry even ashamed because we don’t always do righteous things. And, sometimes we get delayed or stopped or even stuck on the way because of some people we met or some things happened in our lives just like Artaban.

But, that’s okay! Because God knows where we are and sees what we do. Every little thing we do for God and His people and every small step we take towards Him are our precious gifts to our God and he will accept them with pleasure.

As we are at the end of the celebration for Christmas and at the new beginning of our own pilgrimage, may the rising star shine upon us and guide us every step of our way, so that we may offer our best gifts to our God by acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God and with each other. Amen.