



# EXORBITANT IN EVERY MEASURE

January 6, 2019

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Claremont United Methodist Church

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Epiphany of the Lord  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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One of the first things you need to know about Epiphany is that I love it. It's one of those, I love the word; I love the idea. Jan and I also got engaged on Epiphany, and getting engaged on Epiphany adds yet another layer. There's a whole other story there that we won't get into because it takes longer than a sermon to tell it.

Epiphany is that totally un-looked for, and unexpected shift in reality. Sometimes it really does come as an idea that you had never thought of before. And it can be, frankly, pretty brutal. Or sometimes it's a divine revelation that comes, and you really hear the voice of God, and feel God's presence. It shifts how you think and see and feel everything.

The best visual image that I've seen of epiphany is from the old movie, *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. The movie opens with a 9-year-old boy, playing hide and seek in the park on his birthday. He hides in a bush, looks down at his feet to find a knight horseman from a chess game. He doesn't know it's a knight. He doesn't know how to play chess. He picks it up, and looks through the bushes to see people in the park playing speed chess.

In that moment, though he has never played chess, and doesn't even know the name of the pieces, he knows chess. In that moment, he knows all of the moves even though he doesn't know the piece itself. As his life then unfolds, everything is changed. He becomes a chess player. He becomes gifted in chess. He actually becomes one of the youngest grandmasters of chess in the United States.

You should know that God loves epiphanies. God loves to show up, out of the blue, and blow our minds in ways we never thought we could be blown away. In one way, the whole biblical record is one epiphany after another, whether it's God showing up to Abraham and dropping by for lunch, totally unexpectedly, or whether it's God doing a miracle, or Jesus stopping at a well.

So if you take away nothing else from this sermon, take away the idea that God is always doing epiphanies, and that we should be looking for the next epiphany.

On the surface, Epiphany is the story of the magi arriving late. They missed the birth by twelve days. My theory is that they didn't get through the TSA security. Like any good family member arriving late for Christmas, they brought gifts.

Now, the baby is twelve days old. There are some gifts that are appropriate, and some that aren't appropriate.

Our granddaughter, Caroline, received a play kitchen for Christmas. She opened all of the cupboards, pulled out all of the pans, and offered us tea and cookies. Of course, she got cookie baking set with the kitchen. It was totally age appropriate!

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Not so much. It's complicated even more that those are wildly inappropriate gifts for a child, but gold and frankincense were banned substances. They were not for individual use. Frankincense was contraband. It was used as perfume, incense in the temple, and that was all it was to be used for. Gold was the commerce of nations, not individuals. Myrrh wasn't illegal, but it sure cost a lot.

Preachers, for centuries, covered up the inappropriateness of the gifts by focusing on their symbolic value. Gold is a sign of Jesus' kingship, his lordship. Frankincense is a sign of his divinity. Myrrh is a foreshadowing of Jesus' sacrificial death. Suddenly, the gifts seem more appropriate, and it's three a point sermon, which is why I'm going to ignore it all.

And just so we're clear, the epiphany story says nothing about the number of magi present. Some person, who clearly did not have a grandmother, figured three gifts means three magi. Wrong. The idea of one gift from one person is not even close.

The Eastern Church has never bought the idea that there were only three. They point out no king would travel without an entourage or security. Some traditions have forty kings, a nice biblical number.

I don't want to focus on how many kings, or where they came from, or even on the gifts. I want to focus this year on something that all of the gifts have in common. All of the gifts are extravagant, exorbitant, and over the top. They are exorbitant by every measure.

How can we give exorbitant gifts? Protestants don't do well with exorbitant. My experience is that churches, at least Methodist churches, although I've heard other pastors say the same thing, mostly go with the cheapest option, the easy fix, the home repair, the simple basics.

One example from our own Annual Conference is that in the 1950s churches were exploding. The GIs who shipped out to the Pacific from Long Beach decided they had had enough of Iowa, Ohio, Michigan, and North Dakota winters. So they all moved to California.

The Conference came up with this brilliant plan, and hired one architect to provide basic plans for all the churches. Churches could use the same blueprints in different cities and counties. That saved thousands of dollars. The churches look like what I call sort of upside down arks. You can find lots of them, Vista, Escondido, Garden Grove, just to name a few.

They all look the same, bland at best, and they all have leaky roofs. I want to say thank you to the members of this congregation for **not** using those blueprints! This is a unique church built in that period of time.

But uniqueness not only costs more, but it also requires us to step out of the way we normally do things as church. To be unique, to be different, requires courage and requires being willing to change the structures and rituals. We get in the habit of measured, controlled, patterned responses so that there is a rhythm to life.

We need to be clear. God is never stingy. God is always exorbitant.

Do you remember the scene in *Les Misérables* when Jean Valjean is no longer in prison, but has been beaten, is starving, almost frozen? He is found by the bishop, who feeds him, gives him warm clothes, and gives him a place to sleep for the night. In the night, Jean Valjean steals the bishop's silverware, silver plates, and heads out into the darkness.

He is caught by morning, and the police take him to the bishop, and say, "This man says you gave him all this silver."

"Oh, I am so glad you found him!" the bishop says. "He forgot the silver candelabra. Release him. He is a free man."

Extravagant, exorbitant.

And isn't that something like communion itself? We take this bread and juice on on Jesus' behalf, and in his words, say that the table is open to all, all who wish to receive God's grace. We don't ask what you have done. We don't ask about your walk with God, or the sins you have committed, or what opportunities you missed and might have done. We don't ask about the status of your relationships. There is no penance, no pressure.

We simply say, receive the grace of God. Receive the presence of God. Here is the bread. Here is the cup. Here are the candlesticks. Grace. Exorbitant, extravagant.

So if God is not stingy with grace, and if God is always exorbitant and extravagant, then why are we so stingy with grace, affection, or compliments?

Twice this week, I was reading an article talking about the cultural need that souls need unrestricted compliments, affection, not ongoing criticism. When was the last time you told the people that you cannot live well without them that you can't live without them? When was last time we were extravagant, exorbitant in our praise, affection, compliments, grace, or our love?

Church needs to shift. I think we need to see church in a different light. We need to have the exorbitance of communion and the extravagance of grace and those overwhelming, if not inappropriate, gifts. We need to see ourselves as the magi bringing exorbitant gifts to the Christ child. And church should be the place where we can test out our new graciousness. We can be a little more free, a little more giving, a little more emotional.

My guess is that if we try that out in the safety of this congregation, in the uniqueness of this space, that we will discover that we will not only have more epiphanies in our own lives, but we will also become partners with God in helping other people have their own epiphanies as well.

I have learned that more often than not, God has had to adjust God's own plans. And for the epiphanies to happen, most of the time they don't happen in the congregational space. They happen in the parking lot after the meeting. I don't think that's the way God wanted it to be. I'm pretty sure God wants communion to be an epiphany. But, we've got our patterns, and we're safe in those patterns.

The magi weren't safe. The gifts were exorbitant. May we receive the epiphany through the exorbitant grace of God. Amen.