Ephesians 3:1-12  
1This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—  
2for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you,  
3and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,  
4a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.  
5In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:  
6that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.  
7Of this gospel, I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power.  
8Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,  
9and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;  
10so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.  
11This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,  
12in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12  
1In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,  
2asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to honor him.’  
3When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;  
4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people,  
5he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.  
6They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
7“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’  
8Then Herod secretly called for the wise men, and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.  
9Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and honor him.’  
10When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.  
11When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.  
12On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and honored him. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.  
13And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Ephesians 3:1-12 and Matthew 2:1-12  
01/06/2019 – Saginaw First UMC  
“Opening Our Treasure Chests”  
Rev. Amy Terhune

In one church not too long ago, three six-year-old boys were assigned the parts of playing the wise men in the church Christmas pageant. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said, “I bring Gold.”

The second boy presented his treasure and said, “I bring Myrrh.”

The third one then gave his gift and declared, “And Frank sent this.” [from “Follow That Star” by King Duncan, www.esermons.com]

Frank sent this. Makes sense to me. After all, I spent several Christmases as a child saying the Wisemen brought “Gold, Myrrh, and Frankenstein.” No wonder Mary and Joseph were a little shaken by the gifts of the Magi!

Actually, the text doesn’t tell us what Mary and Joseph thought about this experience and these gifts, but all joking aside, if they weren’t shaken, they should have been. These Magi took months to travel hundreds of miles in order to honor a baby king. They didn’t make the trip to bring booties and
baby blankets. These are serious gifts. Gold is offered to a King. Imagine for just a moment that you are an ordinary citizen in ancient Israel, such as Mary and Joseph were. Joseph was a carpenter, so they probably got by all right, despite the fact that they are often called peasants by scholars today. Still, gold was a rarity, something very few ordinary people saw much of. Can you imagine seeing three foreigners show up at your door one night offering gold? Since this takes place long before the Publishers Clearing House Prize Patrol began surprising folks with millions of dollars, one would have to assume that such an occurrence would be very disconcerting, to say the least, if not even somewhat suspicious.

The Magi also offer frankincense, which is exactly what it sounds like—incense. Frankincense is what is offered to gods. It would have burned almost perpetually in the temple in Jerusalem. These Magi bring gold for a king. They bring frankincense for a God.

But what would undoubtedly distressed the young parents most was the gift of myrrh. Myrrh is made from rose petals, it has a sweet smell, but is used as a preservative. Myrrh is an embalming agent—it is something associated primarily with death. Parents out there can probably understand why Mary and Joseph might have been suitably shaken. Cemetery plots and designer caskets are in poor taste at most baby showers today, and Myrrh would have been equally inappropriate then. No one wants to see their infant child presented with a gift meant for the time of death. But it reminds us that this great king and God which has been born is also very human. Jesus was born to die, that he might set us free from sin and death.

Knowing what we do of Jesus’ life and death, and of his identity as Emmanuel, God With Us, these gifts are not the enigma for us that they might have been for onlookers in Jesus day. We understand their significance, they powerful statement they make about the good news that God was about to do for humankind. But now let me pose another question. Suppose we, like those Magi, were to make such a pilgrimage today. What gifts would we bring to Christ to communicate to him and to those around us how we understand his identity? I asked myself that question. What gift could I bring to Christ that would be true to who he is and calls me to be? That’s a really hard question. To answer it, I asked myself this: what is the one word, the best word, the most descriptive word that comes to mind when I think of a King? A God? An atoning sacrifice? And that’s where I found my answers.

The Magi brought gold to a king. The word that comes to mind when I think of a King is ‘leader’. And the one word that best describes a leader, to me, is a visionary. A leader need not necessarily be the best, the brightest, or the strongest. But they absolutely must be able to articulate a vision and chart a course that gets us there.

“If I were to show you a pile of scrap cardboard, old car parts, used tires, and other cast-offs, what would be the first thought that would pop into your mind? Trash heap. Junkyard. Eyesore. Yet there was an article in Time Magazine a few years back about a professor at Auburn University who looked at those same items and saw new homes.

“Professor Samuel Mockbee is the visionary behind an architecture firm that specializes in making lovely, functional, low-cost public buildings and homes for poor residents in Alabama. Mockbee and his students make these lovely, functional buildings out of trash. Specifically, they turn scrap cardboard, old car parts, used tires, and other cast-offs into real homes. One year, some of these students built a chapel and community center for the residents of Mason’s Bend, a tiny, rural town. The students used more than 100 discarded car windows to make one wall of the center. Former students have made homes out of hay bales or old tires. Some of these homes, which are donated to local residents, are attractive enough to be featured in architectural magazines. These students learn to see value in refuse… Somehow, they can imagine something beautiful and lasting where the rest of us only see junk. [2] [3] from Doug Stewart, “Class Act,” Smithsonian, Oct. 2001, pp. 106-113; as used in “A New Vision” by King Duncan, www.esermons.com. Adapted here slightly.]

“…Notice the similarity of the words “imagination” and “Magi”. Imagination is from the word “image,”—meaning a form, a picture—and has descended to us from the Latin “imago,” which, in its turn, was derived from the old Semitic root, “mag,” the same root word from which Magi originated.

“This Sunday, which celebrates of the coming of the Magi, is called Epiphany on the church calendar. In our secular language, an epiphany is a new way of seeing or understanding. It is so
appropriate that we should begin a new year with an epiphany, a new way of seeing, a vision, an image of what our world can be, or what our lives can yet be. Like the magi of old, we need to open our minds, stretch our imaginations. The statesman Konrad Adenauer put it this way, "We all live under the same sky, but we don't all have the same horizon." [2] Is adapted slightly from "A New Vision" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com.] The first gift I bring to Christ is my imagination, my open mind, my willingness to let Jesus change me from the inside out. My gift of gold is the prayer I lift that God will show me how I might see use or beauty in what others regard as useless.

The Magi brought frankincense to a god. What word comes to mind when one thinks of God? I suppose that depends on who God is to you. The word that comes to my mind when I think of God is grace, because that's who God is to me—and that's what makes God different from anyone or anything else I know. Grace, by definition, is not deserved. It's unmerited favor. Grace is why I'm not afraid to come into work every day. Sure, I may have preached a dud of a sermon, missed a chance to care for someone, messed up a visit, failed to be as organized as I should—believe me, as a type-A personality, I can rattle off dozens of mistakes I've made just in the past week or so. What's more, I can rattle off dozens of mistakes that I seem to make all too regularly—that I just can't seem to quite get right somehow! But grace gives me the ability to say: move on, today's a new day, keep trying, God may yet use me now.

If my first gift to Christ is my imagination and open mind, my second gift is my intuition and out-stretched hands. I want to live the grace I receive. I want to communicate the presence of Christ in my life by extending a hand; by allowing others to make their share of mistakes, too; by trying to understand where another is coming from, or why they've made the choices they have, or how life has shaped them to this point.

The first Christmas that Brad and I were married, Brad's sister and brother-in-law gave us a crèche scene. We had been wanting one as we set up house, and they knew that so they bought it for us. It was a really pretty one—the pieces were all ceramic, painted bright colors, with lots of detail work, and there was a little stable-like thing to put a few of them in. We liked it, and every Advent, we'd set it up along with the tree and the lights and all that jazz. Thirty years ago, a catastrophe, or sorts, befell our crèche scene—the baby Jesus disappeared. We went about and searched diligently for the child, but it was only too late that we finally figured out where he went. It seems that Isabelle, who was 20 months old at the time, had picked up Baby Jesus when we weren't looking. Being a smart child, she had recently discovered that if she put her foot on the pedal at the base of the garbage can, the lid would open up. This fascinated her to no end, so nearly everything she could get her hands on wound up in the garbage can—pens, spoons, sippie cups, toys, books, and apparently, poor Baby Jesus. We didn't realize the fate of poor baby Jesus until after the garbage trucks had been and gone. After a quick but fruitless search online to try to replace it, we now had a crèche scene without the central focal point and main attraction. I can't help thinking that perhaps there's some kind of social commentary in that somewhere. I don't know. Maybe he's in one of Professor Samuel Mockbee's houses now—who can say? But then another thought occurred to me: Jesus Christ is the Lord of my home; the Lord of my life; the Lord of the church. But he is also the Lord of the discarded, the wasted, the soiled, the ugly, the broken, the rejected, the cast off, and the trashed. He is God's gift to all of humankind, and especially to those most in need of his healing and transformation. If a professor can make houses out of trash, then God's grace can make new lives out of broken dreams. That's the power of grace. And so my second gift are those open hands, reaching out in acceptance to others because God reached his hand out to me.

Finally, the Magi saw a star at its rising and brought myrrh to one who would die on behalf of humankind. Years later, Jesus' followers saw the stars go out and a cross rise against the sky. There's only one word that comes to mind for me here, and that is savior. And what makes Jesus a savior is not his power or his authority or his might or his wisdom or his valor, or his influence or his courage, though he had all those things. What makes Jesus a savior is his love—his love for me, for each of you, for all of us. His love led him to give his life and his love led him to rise again to life. Love has that ability—to save, to renew life, to enlighten hearts.
"Back in the 70s, an international bestseller entitled The Limits to Growth was published by The Club of Rome, a small and informal international network of scientists, educators, economists and industrialists. The sequel was published in 1992 and entitled Beyond the Limits (Post Mills, Vt.: Chelsea Green Pub. Co., 1992). In a book by a biophysicist, a computer analyst, and a systems theoretician warning us that we have, at most, 30 years to prevent global collapse, it is most strange to find them featuring (of all things!) the word ‘love’. They write, "One is not allowed in the modern culture to speak about love, except in the most romantic and trivial sense of the word. Anyone who calls upon the capacity of the people to practice ... love is more likely to be ridiculed than to be taken seriously" (233). Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows and Jorgen Randers have taken that risk and have ended their book with a clarion call for the peoples of this planet to "practice love." It is, they believe, our only hope if we are to escape "overshoot" (stepping beyond the limits of the earth's carrying capacity) and maintain a sustainable world." [adapted slightly from “Three Wise Gifts” by Leonard Sweet, www.esermons.com]. According to these non-religious analysts, it is love that is going to save us and give us life. Not only do I find that fascinating, I find it inspiring.

And so we bring our imaginations and our open minds. We bring our intuition and our outstretched hands. And we bring to the altar our open hearts—whatever it may be that inspires us to love. We’re going to turn now to a hymn in The Faith We Sing that is new to us, but it’s been one of my favorites for a long time. It asks us to think about who Jesus is. And it closes with the most incredible statement of imagination, grace, love:

And so, distinct from all we’d planned,
   Among the poorest of the land,
   We did what few might understand:
   We touched God in a baby’s hand.

[from “Carol of the Epiphany” by John Bell in The Faith We Sing #2094]