

Some Assembly Required
Matthew 2: 1-12
Don Lincoln

Christmas gifts are a wonderful thing. And yet – every so often one arrives – a bicycle; a piece of furniture; some toy – and on the side of the box, often in microscopic print, the dreaded words: “Some Assembly Required.”

And why is it, that it seems when you are in the middle of one of those, you realize far too late that you have not done what they tell you to do first – that is to read the directions all the way through – I am usually two-thirds of the way when I discover there’s one step that I needed to do first and by then my powered screwdriver is running out of power, and I’ve screwed the screws in so tight I’m likely to strip them backing them out...

Thankfully – NONE of the gifts in today’s text required assembly. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. I’m guessing Mary and Joseph might’ve thought diapers more immediately useful but at least Joseph’s carpentry skills weren’t necessary that first Christmas morning.

Some folks think gift-giving at Christmas stems from this story. That’s a lovely notion, but not the case. It wasn’t until the fourth Century, when the empire was officially Christianized by Constantine, that a pagan Roman holiday – that took place in the middle of December for a week, known as Saturnalia – was overtaken by Christians and reframed by Christian influence to celebrate the birth of Jesus. “They already have a holiday at this time; let’s just wrap it all up for Jesus’ sake!” The gift giving of Saturnalia included gifts like candles, fruits, nuts and cheap wine.

Of course most of what we know about this story doesn’t come from the Bible, but from the Carol “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Unfortunately, much of that hymn is speculation at best – or plain wrong at worst.

There aren’t necessarily three gift givers. The Bible never mentions how many. A 2nd century drawing in the Roman catacombs depicts four Wise Men, two on either side, presenting gifts to Mary and the child. In some medieval art there are twelve Wise Men gathered at the manger. But three gifts – three kings, right? Makes sense.

But they aren’t kings. It was only around the 10th Century when painters started to depict them as kings in art. Perhaps recalling Isaiah 60: “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

The word in Greek – translated Magi – doesn't mean King at all. It was a word that meant at best philosopher or scientist, but more generally covered astrologers, fortune-tellers and magicians of varying degrees of plausibility or quackery. Think 1-900-horoscope.

But what this text does tell us about them and what I DO love about this text is these wise men – these magi – are open to new possibilities. They're obviously seekers; seem to be sincere, making significant journeys, seeking instructions, and probably pretty learned folks. They're strangers to the faith – gentiles, not Jews – otherwise they wouldn't have asked about the birth location of the Messiah, which was to be Bethlehem. They are strangers to the faith, but open to it. Open to new growth in their life, in their heart, in their spirit.

They are led somewhere by a star. A heavenly light helps them see the world in a completely new way. In other words, they are open to an epiphany – an “Ah-ha.”

They're open to being given new instructions. New directions. They choose to go home by another road – presumably not the most convenient one – because they've been tipped off in a dream about Herod's sneaky plans.

These wise seekers are open to new information; open to having their lives reframed. Their lives redirected. They're still in that “some assembly required” understanding of life.

The “We Three Kings” carol puts the story together in a tidy package. Which is how you and I prefer life and our world and our faith. We like the number of kings and gifts to match. We like for leaders and kings to recognize Jesus' authority, and bow down before Him and pay Him homage. We like things tied up neatly with a bow. Clear, straight-forward, no assembly required.

But the fact is, life isn't like that. It's always, to some degree whether we like it or not, under construction. Or should be open to that. There is more to learn; there are more epiphanies to be had, new roads with which to find our way home to the God who loves us.

It's the same with the faith. Now – some of you may have noticed, the team decided to change the Gloria Patri again. Some are happy we've changed to this jazzy, upbeat version; some are not happy that we're not singing the one we've been singing for a long time. We used to sing “Glory Be To The Father” from the 1830's. But the phrase, Glory Be To The Father” comes from the 2nd Century. There have to have been a few other tunes besides the one penned in 1830! Not everyone likes change. I get that. But think about it....

In just my lifetime, the rules for ministers have changed drastically. Around the time I was born, a pastor like me – divorced – would have had to leave the ministry. I would not be allowed to be in the pulpit. Within my lifetime women began to be ordained to ministry – after 2,000 years of never allowing that to happen. Within my lifetime, ordination to ministry and to office in the church was opened to Christians who were gay

and lesbian. All that – just in my short (getting longer) 64 years of lifetime. We're still a work in progress; some assembly required.

For centuries, Christianity has presented itself as an “organized religion”—a change-averse institution protecting and promoting a timeless system of beliefs handed down fully formed in the past. Yet Christianity's actual history is a story of change and adaptation. We Christians have repeatedly adapted our message, methods, and mission to the contours and context of the time in which it serves.

Thankfully, because Christianity's system of beliefs has also supported a wide range of unintended consequences: colonialism; environmental destruction, subordination of women; anti-Semitism; racism.

Author, pastor, theologian Brian McLaren asks: What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a system of beliefs - a doctrinaire or diatribe - but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in compassion, that makes amends for its mistakes and is dedicated to beloved community for all? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs – a system of doctrine – to expressing it as a loving way of life?¹

Best gifts come wrapped in flesh; which, if you think of it, means the best gifts ALL come with some assembly required. Parents of little babies, parents of teenagers, parents of parents, children of parents; we all know, the assembly continues.

The good news for us is that we can trust that God who is the author of the instructions, the One who put it all together to bear us up under construction.

Yesterday, nearly 50 individuals from this congregation met to begin the conversations about implementation of the dreams this congregation voiced in our vision process during 2018. There was energy in the room! Excitement! Which is a good thing. This congregation is still under construction. Westminster is not done by any stretch of the imagination. Some assembly still required.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.

1. Brian McClaren, [The Great Spiritual Migration](#), 2016.