

The Gifts of Janus, Jesus, and the Magi

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Today is the first Sunday of the New Year. Have you ever wondered why the New Year starts in January rather than, say, February or March? The story of New Year's takes us on a journey to an ancient time – a time quite close to when the Magi are said to have presented gifts to the baby Jesus. Since today is also Epiphany Sunday, celebrating the arrival of the Magi, I figured it would be fun to reflect on them both together. As we'll see, both the New Year and the Magi invite us to reflect on transitions and how best to negotiate transitions in ways that bless rather than curse us. Their message may be particularly relevant since many of you are experiencing transitions right now, both in your personal lives and in the life of this church.

The Gift of Janus

Let's first consider the story of how January 1st came to be the beginning of the New Year. None other than Julius Caesar was responsible for this decision. When he became the Roman Emperor in 46 BCE, one of his first orders of business was to change the calendar. He wanted to change the calendar because he *needed* to. The old Roman calendar, which had been in use for nearly seven centuries, was based on the moon's cycles, not the sun. Major corrections were required occasionally to keep the calendar in sync with the sun. This function was critical to timing everything from planting and harvesting to making business transactions and embarking on overseas voyages safely.

By Julian's time, the Roman calendar was out of sync with the sun by 67 days! Julian decided to finally end this nonsense and make a real, lasting change to the calendar. On the advice of the Alexandrian astronomer Sosigenes, Julius converted the Roman calendar from a lunar-based calendar to a solar one. The resulting Julian Calendar was so accurate that it would take a full 128 years for the calendar to be out of sync with the sun by so much as a single day.

This is the scientific background of New Year's Day. But science still doesn't explain why the New Year starts in January. After all, Julius need not have moved the calendar back by 67 days to institute his new, solar-based calendar. He could have just declared March 8th to be New Year's Day, which is where the calendar had effectively drifted to and been done with it.

Likely, Julius saw some political expediency in moving the calendar back – since politicians would be more amenable to making calendar reform if it meant they'd stay in office an extra 67 days. Yet, Julius had other, deeper reasons for declaring January 1st to be the beginning of the New Year.

March is named after the god Mars, who happens to be the god of war. The month dedicated to Mars was the third of the year precisely because winter snows receded

throughout the northern hemisphere, making roadways more accessible to armies. So, March was usually the month that kings launched military campaigns.

If Julius had declared March to be the first month of the year, we wouldn't be celebrating New Year's with Dick Clark, champagne, and kisses but with battle drums and war cries. Does this sound like your idea of a "New Year's Rockin' Eve"? It wasn't Julius Caesar's idea either. Julius thought the year's first month should be devoted not to war but to *transitions*.

Happily, there was already a month dedicated to the *god of transitions*. You can guess the month if you know the god's name: Janus. This is why New Year's Day is January 1st.

Janus was the god of all kinds of transitions. He was the god of gates, doorways, passages, and frames. Significantly, he was the god of endings and beginnings. If you walk down a gallery of statues of Roman gods, you can spot Janus quite readily, as he is the god with two faces: one looking backward to the past, the other looking ahead to the future. Janus is depicted this way because he was thought to have the power to see both past and future simultaneously.

When people experienced major transitions in their lives, they prayed and made sacrifices to Janus, hoping for his help and guidance. At the beginning of the New Year, in the month devoted to the god of transitions, a Roman might seek Janus's guidance concerning three essential questions:

- (1) What have I been carrying with me – what responsibilities, commitments, beliefs, or values – that I should continue carrying this coming year lest I lose them?
- (2) What have I been carrying that has become a burden that I am being invited to let go of this coming year, so as to move more freely and lightly on my path?
- (3) What new thing am I being invited to take on and carry forward, so as to experience greater blessing and benefit than the year before?

While Janus is no Jesus, I have the feeling that Jesus would want us to consider these very questions on the cusp of the New Year – both individually and as a church. In 2025, what needs to be held firmly? What needs to be let go of? And what specifically needs to be let go of in order to grasp new and greater blessings?

Before moving on, why not take a few minutes to consider these questions yourself?

The Gifts of the Magi

I don't consider Janus a real god, but I take the mythology of ancient gods and their interactions with human beings seriously. I do so because the ancients didn't write myths in order to depict precisely what happened hundreds or thousands of years ago. They wrote myths to describe what happens, over and over again, throughout history, down to the present era. It didn't matter to the ancients if their myths about Janus ever "happened that way" from an historical perspective. What mattered was that the myths

revealed something continuously true about the dynamics one should consider during transitions.

When it comes to the relationship between history and truth, those who wrote the stories in our scriptures had a similar perspective as the ancient Romans (and Greeks, Egyptians, and Mesopotamians, for that matter). Many stories in our Bible are part of what I call the “mythological imagination” of the ancient world. While they take place in an historical setting, their purpose isn’t to tell us what happened “once upon a time in a world far away” but to reveal dynamics that are continually true about life and God – including right now, right here.

In Matthew’s story of the Magi, the Magi reveal some wisdom that is vitally important when we are faced with a difficult transition. Not just any transition, mind you, but the Mother of All Transitions. The story of the Magi reveals what happens when you respond to Christ’s own consciousness being birthed within you, when you trade the old wine for the new, and when you move from tribal, human-centered consciousness into universal, Christ-consciousness.

What exactly is “Christ Consciousness”? Christ Consciousness is what you experience when you internalize the way of life that Jesus taught and modeled through his life and ministry, as well as his death and resurrection. Put another way, “Christ Consciousness” is birthed within you when you discover that the One who created you *loves you beyond your wildest imagination*. Not only you but *all* people. Once “Christ Consciousness” is birthed, it grows within you when you accept God’s love and seek to re-orient your whole way of life around it. So, for instance, when Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed a day when “the sons of former slaves sit down together with the sons of former slave owners,” he was envisioning a day when Christ Consciousness slips past the defense systems we erect to keep it away and God’s will is finally done “on earth as it is in heaven.”

The Magi reveal three clues to what Matthew and his community think is most important to know about how our lives become re-oriented in response to transitioning from simple human-centered consciousness to Christ Consciousness. The gifts they offer the baby Jesus serve as clues.

Incidentally, do you remember how many Magi visit the baby Jesus? If you said, “Three,” reread the story. Matthew never discloses how many Magi visit Jesus. It could just as easily have been 30. Matthew simply tells us that the Magi present three gifts. Isn’t it interesting how biblical stories you think you know so well can continue to surprise you?

Gold is the first gift. In ancient times, gold was the preeminent sign of kingship. Do you want to know who is in charge? Just ask who has the gold. The fact that the Magi first presented gold to Jesus is meant to convey that this new form of consciousness – and the way of life it will call us into – is one where we are no longer the masters of our destiny. *Christ* is. We must turn over our “gold” to him – surrendering our claims to power and authority – and submit to God’s will and intention for our lives.

Some believe that submission to God means diminishment of self. Such an idea is no more accurate than the assumption that submitting to love and grace is a diminishment of self – especially when you are the recipient. Submission is about elevating the self far beyond what we can do alone.

Matthew reinforces this point with the Magi's second gift: frankincense. In ancient Israelite religion, frankincense was the happiest scent in all Creation. It was the happiest scent because it marked those times when the veil of separation between ourselves and God is lowered, and we truly feel and experience God's love undiluted, unaltered, unblocked. This is why frankincense is what the priests burned in the Holy of Holies in the Israelite Temple.

When we smell frankincense, it serves as a reminder that nothing can separate us from God's love and grace. As the apostle Paul put it so clearly: "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39)

When we surrender our lives to this kind of love and amazing grace, we begin to reflect this love and grace more and more to others. In so doing, the veil of separation between ourselves and God becomes thinner and thinner. Again, we aren't diminished when we surrender our lives to God. We are exalted!

The final gift offered by the Magi is myrrh. Myrrh introduces a darker note into Matthew's teaching about experiencing "Christ Consciousness." Myrrh was commonly used in the embalming process. It's what the women used to anoint Jesus's own body for burial. Myrrh is the solemn reminder that we *homo sapiens* do not necessarily respond well to those who have traded the tribal, human-centered way of life for a universal, Christ-centered one.

When we accept God's love for us and begin loving others the same way, there's going to be trouble. Most people are not at all convinced that God loves them unconditionally. If they believe in a God at all, they picture a god with enough anger management issues to condemn much of the world to eternal hellfire and damnation. So, their "love" for God is ultimately based on fear of the consequences of *not* loving God.

Suppose you cannot accept God's unconditional love for *yourself*. *In that case*, it can be pretty upsetting when people start claiming God's unconditional love for *themselves* and others who don't seem "worthy" of God's love in the eyes of those who believe it is in their power to judge them. Christ ended up on the Cross for a reason!

As dark of a symbol as myrrh is in the story of the Magi, at least on one level, it is worth noting that myrrh's smell is quite pleasant. So pleasant that the ancients anointed the dead with myrrh precisely because its sweetness was powerful enough to overcome the sour stench of death. This fact points us to a final thing Matthew wants us to know about becoming a New Creation in Christ:

Once you have embraced Christ's own consciousness, surrendered your will (gold) to the Divine, and experienced God's love and grace that flows into you and through you to others (frankincense), then it will transform you into a New Creation that not even death can overcome (myrrh). Death becomes little more than another transition to an even greater beginning.

That's something I think both Janus and Jesus would agree on.

How will Christ Consciousness transform your response to the transitions ahead of you this year?