

## South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers

By Rev. Mary M. Finklea

### Advent 1: Gold

#### Opening Litany

Our minds are overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with hope.**

Our hearts are full of selfish desires, greed, and violence, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for peace.**

Our hands we wring in sorrow and despair, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for joy.**

Our feet are slow to move in service to our neighbor, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with love.**

**Be with us now. Inspire us. Strengthen us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

#### A reading from Matthew, the second chapter.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'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.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then 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 pay him homage." <sup>9</sup>When 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

#### Devotion

Gold. Frankincense. Myrrh. The three gifts the magi brought in homage to the Christ child. Over the next few weeks we will spend time contemplating these gifts. If you are ever play Bible Trivia, and they ask you how many wise men there were, don't get be fooled! The answer is no one knows, the word for magi is plural, so there was more than one, but that's all scripture tells us. Their names and background stories emerge mostly from church legend, but we DO know there were three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Let us reflect on that first gift of gold. Au on the chemical element chart, gold is probably one of the three gifts we can relate to the easiest. Gold is still now a highly coveted item. The price has risen over the last few years, leading people investing in gold and a plethora of television commercials on gold coins and pawn shops where you can sell your gold for cash.

Gold is a precious metal. It's easily bended and formed into beautiful shapes. It is dense soft, malleable. Gold doesn't tarnish much in air or water. It's in your computer, most of your electronics. It may be in your mouth, commonly used in dentistry. It's the focus of many TV reality shows like Gold

Rush. For thousands of years, gold has been desirable. Check out National Geographic or a museum near you to see ancient artifacts, such as crowns, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings that you can easily imagine a lady some centuries ago preparing for a momentous occasion such as a wedding, festival, or coronation.

Gold. Have you even given anyone gold? Or has anyone given you gold? Think about one of those times. Most of those gifts were likely pretty memorable. I remember giving my husband a particular piece of gold fashioned into a circle that he wears every day of his life to remind him of my love. We stood at the altar on our wedding day and exchanged rings and vows. I remember a gold bead necklace my mother wore to church when we were young. She would pick us up and we would play with them and chew on them until she would catch us. Now they reside in my jewelry box with the baby teeth marks of my sister, brother, and me.

I also remember fake gold, getting a ring that turned my finger green. But the wise men, the magi, these educated men from ancient Persia, gave to the baby Jesus the real thing. They gave Jesus, a small child, and his frightened family, a carpenter and his wife, the very best they had. We don't know what happened to these gifts. Some have said the holy family used these items to fund their travel to Egypt in their hurried distress to flee from Herod, escape violence and to cross the border. It's not hard to imagine the gold coins being slipped to border guards in order to secure safe passage. We don't know what happened to the gifts, but we know that they were given. "Opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." What does it look like to open your treasure chest? Whether that is your checkbook, your calendar, or your heart, what does it look like to open your treasure chest and give to Christ?

At Camp Kinard, we glimpse people offering up their treasure in a multitude of ways. Youth advisors give up their weekends to chaperone teenagers. Volunteers share their talent by updating the cabins and doing small handy work. Faithful supporters send in their checks. Children open up and share their personalities, their thoughts and dreams, knowing Camp Kinard is a safe place.

Friends, during this season of Advent, when we glimpse decorations of gold and silver, silver and gold, you are invited to reflect on the magi's offering and may it inspire us in our worship of the Christ child.

## **Discussion**

*Share a little bit about any experience you have had with gold.*

*Talk about what makes something valuable.*

*Talk some about giving gifts. What's the best you've been given? What's the best you've given to someone else?*

*What/who is it that you adore? Value? Respect? Esteem? Worship?*

*What does it look like for you to open your treasure chest?*

## **Prayer**

Let us pray. **O Lord, our God, you are our treasure, our hope, our true security. You have entrusted us with gifts to steward. Make of us good caretakers, loving custodians, and generous givers. Amen.**

## **Dismissal**

Go in peace to serve the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

## South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers

By Rev. Mary M. Finklea

### Advent 2: Frankincense

#### Opening Litany

Our minds are overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with hope.**

Our hearts are full of selfish desires, greed, and violence, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for peace.**

Our hands we wring in sorrow and despair, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for joy.**

Our feet are slow to move in service to our neighbor, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with love.**

**Be with us now. Inspire us. Strengthen us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

#### A reading from Matthew, the second chapter.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'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.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then 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 pay him homage." <sup>9</sup>When 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

#### Devotion

This season of Advent we have been contemplating the gifts of the magi; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Last time we discussed the precious gift of gold, metal that remains highly valuable today. Gold is a gift often given to kings. Imagine Jesus as a vulnerable toddler, wobbling around in a diaper, not exactly a picture of a typical successful king or ruler.

Think for a minute about a typical kindergarten classroom. Imagine and spend some time wondering about who would be your next president or pastor would be from that group. It can be hard to see the next generation's leaders in today's children, or then again, it might be easy!

The Christ child received gifts that are associated with royalty (gold) as well as the priesthood (frankincense). Frankincense is a resin or sap obtained from Boswellia trees. Frankincense is tapped from the scraggly but hardy trees by slashing the bark, which is called striping, and allowing the exuded resin to bleed out and harden. These hardened resins are called tears. Isn't that interesting? The little hunks of dried up sap are called tears.

Boswellia Sacra trees also grow in environments so unforgiving that they sometimes grow out of solid rock. The initial means of attachment to the rock is unknown but is accomplished by a bulbous disk-like swelling of the trunk. This growth prevents it from being ripped from the rock. The trees start producing resin when they are between 8-10 years old. What is burned as incense and used in worship in churches around the world today is produced in Somalia. The next time you take a whiff of frankincense and sing “let my prayers rise before you as incense” think about the prayers of your Somalian brothers and sisters and the link we share together in Christ.

The Greek historian Herodotus (not the same Herod from our reading) reported that the gum was dangerous to harvest because of the venomous snakes in the area. Burning the gum of another tree supposedly emit smoke that would drive the snakes away.

Frankincense was one of the consecrated incenses that is mentioned in the Old Testament being used in ceremonies and services within the temple. Mentioned in Exodus, Leviticus, and Song of Solomon, frankincense was one of the ingredients in the perfume of the sanctuary, “pleasing to the nostrils of the Lord.” This makes more sense when you understand the Hebrew. The word for anger is similar to saying flaring nostrils, and if you think about it, when you get angry, that’s what happens! And if something is pleasant, pleasurable, or soothing, it is to say that it is pleasing to the nostrils. Therefore, we have this sense of prayer rising up as incense as a happy smell to our God.

Remember the verse from the psalms, “let my prayer rise before you as incense.” The gift of frankincense is a reminder of the temple, a reminder of holy worship, and prompts us to think of Jesus as Priest. Jesus intercedes for us. Jesus prays for you. It’s a bit bizarre for us to think about Jesus praying but scripture gives us several examples. See how many you can name. Jesus is King, and Jesus is our great High Priest.

Frankincense comes from trees and is a natural product of the earth’s resources. At Camp Kinard, we give thanks for God’s beautiful creation, and use the trees around us to point to God’s majesty. Today, contemplate your role in caring for creation as part of what it means to be a follower of Christ, our great High Priest.

## **Discussion**

*Think about little children that you know and contemplate their future.*

*Who helped shape your understanding of vocation? Who helped you become you?*

*How did you decide what to do for a living?*

*Camps are often called “a seed bed to a seed bed (seminary)”. Many rostered leaders and lay leadership hear a call to ministry at camp. How are you encouraging the next generation of pastors and deacons?*

## **Prayer**

**Let us pray. O Lord, our God, you are the giver of all good gifts. We thank you for the spectacular diversity of trees across the planet. In this season in which we encounter evergreens, symbolic of your eternal presence, remind us, too, of the tree of your cross. Help us continue to plant seeds of new life and encourage the vocations of all the baptized. Amen.**

## **Dismissal**

**Go in peace to serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

## South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers

By Rev. Mary M. Finklea

### Advent 3: Myrrh

#### Opening Litany

Our minds are overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with hope.**

Our hearts are full of selfish desires, greed, and violence, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for peace.**

Our hands we wring in sorrow and despair, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for joy.**

Our feet are slow to move in service to our neighbor, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with love.**

**Be with us now. Inspire us. Strengthen us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

#### A reading from Matthew, the second chapter.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'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.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then 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 pay him homage." <sup>9</sup>When 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

#### Devotion

"Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." We turn our attention to myrrh, probably the least known of the three gifts. Myrrh, like frankincense, is a resin, a gum or a sap. Myrrh gum is waxy and coagulates quickly. After harvest, the gum hardens even more and has a glossy appearance. At times in ancient history, its value has been equal in weight to gold. Throughout history, myrrh has been used as perfume, incense, and even medicine.

In pharmacy, myrrh is used as an antiseptic in mouthwashes, gargles, and toothpastes for prevention and treatment of gum disease. (I was surprised to learn quite a lot writing this series!!) It is also actually used in researching cancer drugs as well.

But in the time frame in which we are interested, myrrh was used by the ancient Egyptians for the embalming of mummies. Myrrh was a form of incense most associated with the dead and dying. Think of the women coming to the tomb on Sunday morning to clean the body. Myrrh was often used to anoint the dead. We have this small, little thing, maybe a pocketful or handful of myrrh that bookends both chapters of Jesus' earthly life, his birth and his death. One handful of myrrh might have

traveled for miles on the back of a camel in the luggage of the wise men. At the other end of his earthly life, one pocketful of myrrh travels in the skirts of the women ready to anoint his bruised body.

And so, myrrh would have reminded the early Christians hearing of these gifts, of Jesus' death. It would likely be an unusual gift to give a baby upon its birth. It would be akin to giving a new mother, instead of a cute little outfit for her baby, a shroud instead. There are some flowers whose fragrance always reminds me of a funeral arrangement. This gift of myrrh, while a nice, expensive gift, would have also had the connotation, a twinge of death, associated with it.

The three gifts to the infant Jesus remind us that Jesus is King, Priest, and Savior. All of them remind us that this little child grows up. He does not stay a baby. He is going to teach and preach. He will accompany lepers, tramps, and tax collectors. He is going to suffer, die, and rise again.

Suffering is uncomfortable. Even now you may be thinking, *don't dampen my Christmas mood with depressing stuff!* Yet it behooves us to remember even at the beginning of Jesus' earthly life of the broken world in which he entered. In our reading, we hear the political drama and the cultural context surrounding baby Jesus' arrival. We hear of jealous kings, secret meetings, hidden agendas, and violence. We picture a refugee family on the run. We hear of dreams and the magi returning home a different way. The world is not always a perfect place.

At Camp Kinard, we know people come to us with the trauma of life fresh on their hearts. We host children who have lost siblings to cancer. We welcome widows and widowers who grieve the loss of a spouse. We gather those who mourn the injustices of this world and provide time for healing, restoration, and renewal. Camp, like your church, is a beacon of rest and respite in a busy, hurting world. We welcome in the name of Christ all those who are weary of death and destruction and long for a word of hope. As you reflect this day on the gift of myrrh, consider all those who walk closely those who grieve.

## **Discussion**

*Who has walked with you in times of sadness and despair?*

*With whom have you walked as they grieve?*

*How have you experienced new life and words of hope in a camp setting?*

*What does it mean to think of Easter at Christmas and to think of Christmas at Easter?*

*Talking about death can often feel taboo, but how can talking about suffering and death be liberating?*

*At the end of your life, what do you want your legacy to be?*

*Camp, like church, is not an escape, but it can be a retreat. From what do you need a break?*

## **Prayer**

Let us pray.

**O Lord, our God, your love is everlasting, and eternal is your reign. We give you thanks that you have shared our suffering and have known our sorrows. Help us remember that you were born to save. Thank you for walking with us in our joys and sorrows. Amen.**

## **Dismissal**

Go in peace to serve the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers

By Rev. Mary M. Finklea

### Advent 4: Home By Another Way

#### Opening Litany

Our minds are overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with hope.**

Our hearts are full of selfish desires, greed, and violence, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for peace.**

Our hands we wring in sorrow and despair, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait for joy.**

Our feet are slow to move in service to our neighbor, and yet...

**O Lord, our God, we watch and wait with love.**

**Be with us now. Inspire us. Strengthen us. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

#### A reading from Matthew, the second chapter.

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'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.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then 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 pay him homage." <sup>9</sup>When 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

#### Devotion

We have now heard the same scripture reading for several weeks. Many of you have heard this passage from Matthew for years and cannot begin to count how many times you have read it. Still others of you may be encountering it for the first time. No matter how many times I read a Bible passage, something new always calls for my attention. There is an old saying, "Not only do we read the Bible, but the Bible reads us." This is just a simple way of saying we bring things with us when we read scripture.

Maybe fear has been on my mind, because the part about Herod being afraid jumps out. King Herod is afraid. What do you think he is afraid of? Why? Maybe he understands that his power, control, status is temporary, and this Jesus, King of the Jews, will be a threat. Scripture includes, "and all Jerusalem with him" indicating society at large is fearful, skeptical about rocking the boat, changing the way things have always been. It is funny how sometimes we can fear good things. Even good news that shakes things up can be nerve-wracking and cause us to quake in our boots.

Herod summons the folks he assumes to be experts on this new king, and asks the chief priests and scribes about where the Messiah is to be born. Comic book fans all love a good origin story, and hearing about the superhero's arrival is intrinsic to the story.

They tell Herod about Bethlehem, whose name means the House of Bread. They quote scripture that reminds folks even the little places are by no means last. Herod has a talk with the wise men and tells them he, too, wants to pay homage to the newborn king. We don't know if the wise men grow suspicious at this or if we are to understand Herod is genuine at this moment. Either way, they follow the star, and were overwhelmed with joy when it stops. They enter the house and see the child and his mother. Then kneeling, they open up their treasure chests, and offer gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We then hear about a dream. Various dreams appear in scripture to indicate in ways in which God reveals God's self. They decide to return home by another way. They have to take a different path home.

We, too, are changed, transformed, altered from our encounters with the Holy One. Our experiences with God make us different people than what we once were. Our experiences loving and serving God's children change our approach in how we see the world and our place in it. We hear in scripture about being "a new creation", and Luther speaks often about the continual conversion of our hearts in which every day we die to sin and are born anew.

Camp changes lives. South Carolina Lutheran Retreat Centers is embarking on a capital campaign to raise money for a chapel and multi-purpose building. We know that guests, visitors, and campers go home differently than how they arrived. Our mission is to provide holy spaces for God to change lives. Join us in this good work. Pray for us, and consider supporting this ministry with a financial gift. During this Advent season, let us all contemplate ways in which we can bring our gifts to God. Think about the loaves and the fishes. God always has a way of multiplying what we offer in service to others to change the world for the better.

## **Discussion**

*The contrast between Herod/Cesar/Empire and Jesus occurs throughout the New Testament. How does the kingdom of God compare and contrast with the kingdom of Herod?*

*The magi detect a warning in a dream. What do you think God is alerting us to in these days?*

*What does it mean for you to go home "by another way"?*

*Change can be hard, but also full of surprising joy. How has following God changed your life?*

*Will you consider supporting SC Lutheran Retreat Centers? Visit our website at [www.sclrc.org](http://www.sclrc.org) Thank you!*

## **Prayer**

Let us pray.

**O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.**

**Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.**

**We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;**

**oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel. Amen.**

## **Dismissal**

Go in peace to serve the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**