"Bring Your Imperfect Offering"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki

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Men!! How impractical! Send them out to buy a simple gift for a newborn and what do they come back with! First of all gold. Sounds like a great idea but wouldn't an online transfer from their account into Joe and Mary's at the Nazareth National have been a lot safer? I mean Joseph and Mary had to carry all this gold from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth across the desert territory rife with bandits. It certainly put them much more at risk to make it home alive. Well and then there's this frankincense and myrrh stuff. I mean sure it made the stable smell better but couldn't it be something a little more useful? A blanket, a monitor, a baby sling? C'mon guys! And that wasn't the worst of it. They bungled up the whole trip when you come right down to it. I mean Herod had been king of Israel for a long time over 30 years , the words "kinder/gentler" had never been applied to him – he stayed king that long by eliminating quickly all possible threats and his reputation must have spread even to the East. No a little naïve Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar go tell Herod there was a newborn king of the Jews and then to go back and tell him the exact time the star appeared. While Jesus escaped this bungling cost many babies in Bethlehem their lives. C'mon guys! No it was an imperfect offering by some very imperfect "wise" men.

But it turned out OK in the end – that's where the meaning is. In his 1993 song "Anthem", poet and singer/songwriter, Leonard Cohen sings what seems to be meant for our friends the magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.

Well we know about cracks and bells. History Professor Constance Greiff wrote of the Liberty Bell: The Liberty Bell is the most venerated object in the Liberty Bell Center at Independence National Historical Park, a national icon. It is not as beautiful as some other things that were in Independence Hall in those momentous days two hundred years ago, and it is irreparably damaged. Perhaps that is part of its almost mystical

appeal. Like our democracy, it is fragile and imperfect, but it has weathered threats, and it has endured. And we pray, as it appears to be threatened more than at any time in recent history, that in 2024 it will endure.

It should be noted that the crack is approximately a 1/2 " wide and 24.5 inches long. Each year more than a million people visit the Liberty Bell.

So what are your cracks and my cracks? Would you like a million people to see them? Remember that's how the light comes in. But we cover them up as best we can – physical ones with make-up or clothing, others we cover up by silence or talking all the time or avoiding certain people or situations that make us feel vulnerable or imperfect. Or maybe we feel afraid to give that gift of ourselves – that we'll be inadequate. Embrace the cracks, remember the Liberty Bell. Anglican solitary, Maggie Ross, has said that "only the devil is perfect", meaning that we destroy our souls and our openness to each other by seeking perfection, which is impossible to attain anyway, if we can only accept our imperfections, our cracks. There's a crack in everything and that's how the light gets in and today we call that light "Epiphany/manifestation" and that light is God. Quaker theologian Parker Palmer reflecting on Cohen's song has said

it's in those cracks that we connect with each other. It's in the brokenness that we connect with each other and that we generate very mysteriously the abundance called hope that actually can make us move our feet and move our hands and move our minds towards something better. If you learn your inner landscape well enough you realize yes, there's a piece of turf in there called fear. And you can choose to stand there if you want, but there are other places in that inner landscape where you can stand as well if you work at it. You can stand in a place of hope. You can stand in a place of fellow feeling. You can stand in a place of appreciation of beauty. You can choose where you stand as you move toward other people, the news of the day, the events of your own life, the situation of the moment. There's no perfection in that. You screw up. But you can also stand in a place of self-forgiveness, which is also somewhere in there, and cut yourself some slack and try it again.

So the good news Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar is that your imperfect offering is how the light got in. If the story was too easy, too perfect, it would have been rejected for not enough plot depth. Epiphanies happen when we let the light in – when we look at a person or situation or omigosh even ourselves, in a new way and acknowledge the cracks to let the light in. Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar took a risky and arduous journey following a star, looking for light.

Mary Oliver in her poem, 'Six Recognitions of our Lord' writes of a moment, not when she made an arduous journey, but when she simply lay on the grass, and entered a

place of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-wanting.. 'Then,' she says, 'I go back to ... my own house, my own life, which has now become brighter and simpler, somewhere I have never been before.' I think the wise men in returning home saw everything more brightly. The Light they had found in a distant land turned out to be the Light at the heart of their own land. But now they saw it as if for the first time. With all their imperfect offerings they let the light in, and it stayed.

Shall we serve this Light together? Shall we bow to it in one another and every nation? It is the Light within all life. The light is God and Epiphany is letting God's light in and back out again. May we all be Epiphanies in 2024. Happy New Year.