

The Gifts We Bring

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden

Christmas Eve 2019 (6:00 pm)

“What can I offer, poor as I am?
If I were shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise one, I would do my part;
but what can I offer: all my heart.”

The song we just sang is one of my favorite Christmas songs! I especially like those last lines about how we wonder what gift we can bring to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Tonight, we celebrate that God loves us so much that God comes to us in this baby. This is God’s big gift to us! God shows us how much God loves this world and is part of all of us no matter what happens in our lives. God is right here with us. God loves it when we take care of each other and a newborn child needs a lot of help. At Christmas, God gives us the gift of love in this child and reminds us that we care for God when we take care of each other. These are gifts to us!

We all love gifts, don’t we! Christmas is a fun time to receive and to give gifts. Tonight, we also want to talk about the gifts God gave us that we are meant to share like love and special talents. It is wonderful to know how we can be part of helping God and each other. I will say more about this in a little while. First, I want to share a story about the angel Melvin who found a way to help God by sharing what he was really good at. Let me tell you about Melvin:

Melvin was an angel.¹ He had blazing red hair that stood up and stuck out in all directions. Melvin was small and not very important as far as angels go. When the angels got together to listen to God, Melvin was usually standing in the back. He stood there with a broom and a box because he was supposed to clean up after any gathering. The angels were all very clean but maybe once in a thousand years, there was a valuable angel feather that had come loose and needed to be swept up. Melvin was hoping to work as a cloud sweeper someday but his real dream was to become a star shiner. He kept checking the bulletin board to look out for suitable job openings.

¹ This story is taken almost verbatim from the children’s book *The Star of Melvin* written by Nathan Zimelman, illustrated by Olivier Dunrea (Macmillan Publishing: NY, 1987).

When Melvin got a chance to try out cloud sweeping, he got very frustrated. The cloud sweeping broom was so big and hard to handle and Melvin so small that it looked like the broom was sweeping Melvin across the sky and not the other way around. One day, Melvin got his hands on one of the coveted star shining cloths although he was not an official star shiner yet. The cloth was so big that Melvin could barely lift it up and when he did, the cloth kind of took over and he found himself all wrapped up in it as if the cloth was polishing him. Melvin was determined not to give up and kept showing up for potential job assignments.

One day, he was even first in line and then noticed that he was the only one in line. Melvin asked the angel-in-charge: "Am I too early?" The angel-in-charge was very busy being busy and did not look up from the big notebook in which he was writing big notes. He just said: "No." Then Melvin asked: "Am I too late?" "No, you are just in time," replied the angel in charge and held out a polishing cloth. "Go ten million miles to the west and take one step left and you will find the star you have been assigned." Melvin was so excited. He had just been made a star shiner and the cloth the angel gave him was just the right size for his hands. No more wrestling the polishing cloth! "It's a very small star," said the angel-in-charge. "Do you want the job?" "I do, I do!" cried Melvin. "That's good because no one else wants to do it," replied the angel-in-charge.

When Melvin arrived at his star, he could see that it was not only very small, it was also dull. It wasn't shining much at all but Melvin was really happy about his star. Caring for such a star was all he ever wanted. So, Melvin polished his star in the morning, at noon, and even far into the evening long after other star shiners had stopped their work for the day. Even when Melvin turned to go home, he would always turn one more time to give that star one more rub with the sleeve of his angel robe. Melvin was patient because it took not just a week or a few months or even a year. He took a long time until his dull star began to shine but Melvin could see how the heavens around it began to grow brighter and happier.

One of his friends was so impressed with Melvin's star that he encouraged Melvin to take it to the star shining contest that was about to start. At first, Melvin said, "It's kind of small for a contest." "Nobody said anything about large, Melvin. This is a very beautiful star," his friend replied. Melvin had to agree. "Big isn't everything!" he said and gently rubbed his star.

Melvin and his friend lined up with the other angels who wanted to show God their star. One by one the angels came before God. God appreciated each star but then always said to the angel who brought it, "No, this is not quite it but let's wait and see. We need a good star for a special birthday." Then it was down to Melvin who was last in line. Just then, a trumpet sounded, and all the angels gave a big sigh. It was the Archangel Gabriel making a grand entrance with an especially impressive star in his hands. Surely, now none of the other angels would stand a chance of having their star chosen. Gabriel showed his star to God and let it sparkle and twirl with many colors. Gabriel was pretty sure of himself and his star but God had not forgotten about Melvin. "Come, Melvin, show me your star," God said. Melvin stepped forward and held out his star. God looked at the star for a long time and smiled. "Melvin you understood how to care for your star. This is the right one!" Then all the angels cheered and even Gabriel blew his trumpet in celebration.

"Now, Melvin, come with me," said God. Together, they walked across the heavens. Every once in a while, God looked at Melvin's star and kept saying, "He'll like it. Yes, he'll like it." Finally, God stopped in an empty space in the sky that needed light. "Put it here, Melvin, just so." Melvin found the right spot. "How nicely it fits," said God. "Everything around it looks so much happier. There is a gladness here now, Melvin, look!" Melvin gave his star one last rub with the sleeve of his robe and the star shone even brighter. Now Melvin looked down to see what was below. His star was bringing beautiful light to the little town of Bethlehem. Something amazing was about to happen there!

The Star of Bethlehem! We have all heard about it. It showed the way to the Christ child in the manger. What I love about the story of Melvin and his star is that he poured all his heart into

helping the star shine and be at its best. Melvin believed that it didn't matter to God that he was small and young. He had an important gift to share to help bring the gift of love to the people of the earth. His patience, love and care for the star made all the difference. All of us have gifts and talents and God is happy when we nurture them and share them. Some of us are very good at being a friend who can listen well and is kind. Some of us are great at building things (someone had to build the manger!). Others bring joy through music or art. Some of us are great at asking important questions. Some of us are good at speaking out when we see that someone is not treated well. We all have hearts that love. Each of us has gifts to share.

In many countries, people have the tradition of bringing gifts to the Christ child on Christmas Eve. We will do that as well tonight. We have little gift boxes prepared for you and stars on which you can write what you would like this gift to be that you have to share. As soon as you are ready, please come forward and place your gift by the manger. It is a sign of how every one of us matters to God and every one of us is a gift from God to this world. I invite you to take your star home with you so that you can remember that you also shine your light.

Merry Christmas!