Had it not been for the Wise Sages from the East, we may not associate gift-giving with Christmas. They are the first Gift-Givers to the Christ-Child, indeed, his only Gift-Givers. Mary and Joseph had almost nothing, and according to Luke, were separated from their families. There were no proud grandparents nearby, no doting aunts or uncles. No best friends, bearing gifts. The shepherds came empty-handed. A baby’s normal gift-givers were missing.

It is the Gospel of Matthew that introduces these strangers, who came from afar. We know the Wise Astrologers for one thing only: they came to offer homage by giving gifts. We really don’t know how many Persian Sages came: we say three because they gave three gifts, so we have assigned each sage a gift, and since the 8th century, Western Christianity has given them names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. But these names are not Persian in origin, and Syrian Christians have historically given them Persian names: Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdad. Doesn’t exactly have a cozy, familiar ring, does it?

On the first week of Advent, we looked at the commercial aspect of gift-giving and the contradictions that materialism introduces to the real meaning of Christmas. However, gift-giving is biblical and can be traced to the nativity story itself, to these Gift Givers from the East. Look what they started: a season of giving gifts unlike any other.

And we are touched when we think there might be some who did not receive a gift at Christmas – because the wise sages came bearing gifts. Our congregation was responsible for six immigrant families at the Bethel Center receiving gifts for Christmas. Without us, their Christmas would have been bare. The Wise Sages from the East started something that has enveloped each of our lives, and each of our Christmases. It has touched the world. In the midst of all the weekly gift-giving during this Advent season, members of our church gave almost $1500 to our Deacon Benevolent Fund so that emergency needs might be addressed around us. I stand amazed!

Stories have power in and of themselves. They speak to us as cold, hard facts seldom can. They grip us and draw us into their narratives. And stories can often relate a truth in a more compelling way.

I am convinced that the nativity story offers a truth about how God is involved with humankind. It is a story of a God who acts through simple, common people to introduce a way of peace, light and hope to an unexpecting world.
On our first Christmas in Birmingham, Michigan, many in the congregation and city were outraged because a recent law suit had been brought against the City of Birmingham which compelled the city to no longer put a large nativity creche on the lawn of City Hall. Many had grown up with the creche and were troubled by the increasing commercialization of Christmas. When the creche was removed, it was, to them, an effort to “take Christ out of Christmas.” By our second Christmas, when the complaints again surfaced, I finally said, “The nativity story isn’t the responsibility of City Hall. If it is to be told, it should be told by the church, not the government.”

A few members took me up on this, and it was decided that First Baptist Church of Birmingham would produce a Living Nativity in their outdoor courtyard. No other church in the area offered a live nativity and families streamed to the church every year for the re-enactment. Of course, I got the idea from this church, which at the time was offering the Living Nativity.

One year, in between performances, the first crowd of the evening had gone inside for warm drinks and a mini-concert of Christmas music. And I was the only person outside. And I noticed that a father and two sons, maybe 8 and 10 years old, wandered down to see the live animals in the stable, adjacent to the creche. After awhile, they turned to leave, and as they reached the stairs to climb back up to the street level, I heard the father ask his sons, “You know why these animals are here, don’t you?” The boys had a blank look on their faces. The incredulous father said, “Don’t you boys know the story of Jesus’ birth?” They obviously had never heard it. They likely knew the story of Frosty the Snowman and of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. But, like many young children today, once the government and the schools stopped telling the story, the church failed to pick it up and tell it, so the story is vanishing from our cultural memory.

The father asked his two sons to sit on the stairs, and I stood frozen off in the shadows, and I was privileged to listen as this father told an unrehearsed story to his two sons, pointing to the manger and the creche. His sons listened with wonder in their eyes. And after he was done, they rose and left, having never seen our production of the Living Nativity. And I thought to myself, if that had been the only telling of the story that night, it would have been worth all the trouble, just to provide a reason for this father to tell this wonderful story to his sons.

Katherine Hankey wrote the words to this old gospel hymn:

I love to tell the story of unseen things above  
Of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.  
I love to tell the story, because I know tis true,  
It satisfies my longings, as nothing else can do.  

(Katherine Hankey, 1834-1911)

I also think of the song, “Pass it On,” with words,  
“That’s how it is with God’s love, once you’ve experienced it,  
You spread his love, to everyone, you want to pass it on.”
One thinks of Jesus’ words, “Freely you have received; freely give.” (Mt. 10:8)

Some gifts keep on giving. The word for it is reciprocity, giving in return. Typically, when you receive a gift, you want to give one in return, a reciprocal action. Today, we call it “paying it forward.” Congregations are filled with giving, year-round, and thus, congregations are filled with the spirit of reciprocity.

Reciprocity, the powerful urge to give back, to pass it on, is portrayed beautifully in the musical, *Les Miserables*. It is a story of two powerful experiences of reciprocity – one that leads to selfless giving and the other ends in tragedy. Jean Val-Jean steals bread as a young man to feed his sister’s starving children. He is caught and sent to prison to do hard labor for many years. He finally wins release and is placed on parole – but he finds no open doors. He breaks parole and becomes a hardened criminal. Yet, one night a village priest offers him respite and a meal. At the end of the meal Val-Jean steals from the priest. He is caught by police and is about to be sent back to prison.

The priest opens his door to find the police holding Val-Jean in custody. The police say, “Monsignor, we have your silver
We caught this man red-handed
He had the nerve to say you gave him this

The priest says, “That is right.
But my friend you left so early
Surely something slipped your mind
You forgot I gave these also;
Would you leave the best behind?
So messieurs, please release him
This man has spoken true.
I commend you for your duty
And God's blessing go with you.”

The disgruntled police depart, and then the priest sings to Val Jean,

“But remember this, my brother,
See in this some higher plan.
You must use this precious silver
To become an honest man.
By the witness of the martyrs,
By the passion and the blood,
God has raised you out of darkness:
I have saved your soul for God.”

(lyrics in French by Alain Boubit and in English by Herbert Kretsmer)
This act of unexpected kindness, this gift, changed Val-Jean and prompted him to acts of selfless love throughout the rest of his life.

But, Val-Jean has still broken parole and is relentlessly hunted down by the sheriff, Javert. Toward the end, Val-Jean has the opportunity to kill the sheriff, and instead, spares his life. Javert experiences the power of reciprocity, of owing his life to the generosity of the man whom he has hunted down for years. And the sheriff doesn’t know how to return grace, and tragically ends his life.

One family discovered the true meaning of reciprocity at Christmas. The story is told by the wife and mother of the household. “Mike, my husband, hated the frantic over-spending that Christmas normally represents. Knowing he felt that way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I struggled for something special just for Mike. And the inspiration for my gift came in a most unusual way.

Our son, Keith, was on the wrestling team at his school, and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner city church.

These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without protective headgear. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up winning every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn’t acknowledge defeat.

Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, “I wish just one of them could have won. They have a lot of potential but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.” Mike loved kids – all kids – and he coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That’s when the idea for his gift came.

That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of headgear and wrestling shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years.

For each Christmas, I followed the tradition – one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose house had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on.

The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand
with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents.

Last year, we lost Mike to cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But on Christmas morning, there wasn’t one envelope on the tree, but three. Each of our sons had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. It is a tradition that our sons have said they want to continue as my future grandchildren stand around a tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope.

Most of us exchanged gifts this Christmas with family, loved ones and friends, and most of us have opened our gifts. The gift boxes and wrapping paper have been discarded and gifts put in their proper places.

Yet, the season of gift-giving has just begun. God’s gift to us at Christmas is a gift that keeps on giving. Scripture says, “We love, because God first loved us.” It could as easily said, “We give, because God first gave to us.” (I John 4:19)

God first gave us light at Christmas and so we want to bring light to those around us. God first gave love at Christmas and so we want to share that love. God first gave peace at Christmas and so we want to be peacemakers.

It was a little over three years ago when the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut occurred. Out of that tragedy, this story emerged:

“Fighting back tears and struggling to catch his breath, the father of a six-year-old gunned down in Friday’s school shooting in Connecticut told the world about a bright little girl who loved to draw and was always smiling…

Robbie Parker’s daughter, Emilie, was among the twenty children who died in one of the worst schoolyard attacks in US history. He was among the first parents to speak publicly:

‘She was beautiful. She was always smiling,’ he said. ‘It’s a horrific tragedy, and we want everyone to know that our hearts and our prayers go out to them—this includes the family of the shooter. I can’t imagine how hard this experience must be for you, and I want you to know that our family, and our love and our support go out to you as well…

My daughter, Emilie, would be one of the first ones to be standing and giving her love to all these victims, because that’s the type of person she is. Not because of any parenting that my wife and I could have done, but because those were the gifts given her by her Heavenly Father. As the deep pain begins to settle in our hearts, we find comfort reflecting on the incredible person Emilie was, and how many lives she was able to touch in her short time here on earth.’”

The gift of this father’s forgiveness will be a gift that keeps on giving. It will touch others who will be inspired to forgive, to go the second mile, to love and value their children, to “pay it forward.”
As we dwell on the story of nativity with its Wise Sages from the Orient bearing their gifts, may it open our hearts and widen our compassion. For within this story is a gift that keeps on giving. Amen.