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Over the holidays, the wrapping paper flew off the packages, with eager eyes ready to spy the contents inside the colorful paper. Some may have exclaimed, “This is just what I wanted,” while others may have pondered, “Can I return this?”

Armed with gift receipts, returning items has become a lot easier these days. Even returning items ordered online has become routine, but I imagine if Mary and Joseph wanted to return the gifts from the magi, their task would have been much more difficult.

Travelers from the East who came searching for the newborn child, who by the time they arrived might have found a toddler rather than a baby, for the holy family was no longer in the stable of the inn, but as Matthew’s Gospel tells us, living in a house. The travelers had watched the skies at night, blending together what we today call astronomy and astrology. Astronomy observes the stars and planets and tries to understand through science the movement of the objects in the sky, while astrology

tries to understand the meaning of the events in the skies and how the movements impact our lives.

Astronomers today have used computer software to envision what happened in the sky 2000 years ago that create a brilliant display of light. Some of have noted that the planet Jupiter would have been near the star Regulus, a word meaning “the King’s star.”¹ Later, the planet Jupiter may have aligned with the planet Venus, combining their light to create a brilliant display. The travelers could have interpreted these events to mean that a king had been born.

Why would events in the sky lead people to think that someone important had been born? The Jewish scriptures contained many passages with hopeful visions speaking about light, but one in particular jumps out. Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had said:

Arise! Shine! Your light has come;
the LORD’s glory has shone upon you.

²Though darkness covers the earth
and gloom the nations,
the LORD will shine upon you;
God’s glory will appear over you.

³ Nations will come to your light
and kings to your dawning radiance...
⁶ Countless camels will cover your land,
young camels
from Midian and Ephah.
They will all come from Sheba,
carrying gold and incense,
proclaiming the LORD's praises. ²

Do you hear the echoes in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth? Nations and kings coming to light, camels, gold, and incense? The gold I can somewhat understand being brought as a gift. Mary could use it to buy some needed supplies for a baby. But frankincense and myrrh? Why would someone bring these gifts? Did she wonder if she could return them for something more practical?

I once received a Christmas card picturing Mary and Joseph and several visitors gathered around the baby Jesus. As Mary opened other gifts after the wise men had left, she proclaimed, "Diapers, receiving blankets, and an infant mule seat! Now these I can use!" The line at the bottom of the card said, "Fortunately, three wise *women* came by later."

Frankincense and myrrh were aromatic substances from the resin of trees, often used for perfume, to burn as incense to create a pleasant smell, or for embalming people who had died. They seem a bit impractical for a new baby, though Mary may have thought, "How can I use these gifts? I guess I could use the fragrant smell of incense to cover up some unpleasant baby smells. But I wonder, can I return these?"

Some readers of the Bible have interpreted these gifts as symbols of royalty, the incense and gold as signs of a king. Others have seen the embalming resins as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death, for even before the end of Matthew's story King Herod strives to find this baby and have him killed. This story reminds us that the powers of the world often try to destroy those who they believe will threaten their security. The birth of a baby intimidated a mighty ruler at a time when people were restless with unjust rulers and hoped for change. Herod may have thought, "If I can't return

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this child who threatens my power, I will destroy him.”

If Mary had known the suffering that would occur in her son’s life, foreshadowed by the gifts of embalming incense from the travelers, she may have wanted to ask, “Can I return these gifts that hint of suffering? I don’t know if I want to be the mother of a son who competes with the powers of the world. I don’t want to see him die, suffering at the hands of those who want to maintain their control in the world. Couldn’t I just have a regular baby, one who I can watch grow up, one who can offer me grandchildren and pleasant times in my old age?”

Sometimes life offers us things we would rather not have. We may wish we could return a part of our life in exchange for something else, though many times we can turn those struggling times into opportunities for good, which is what Elizabeth Smart discovered after surviving

a kidnapping in the early 2000s. For nine months, she was held captive, raped, and mentally abused by her captors. She never gave

up hope that one day she would be rescued. On her first day of captivity, she took a safety pin off her nightgown and pinned it to the inside of the sleeve of the robe they made her wear. That little safety pin was all she had left of home. Her memories of home, held secure by that safety pin, gave her hope to keep going those long nine months. She was finally rescued and now fights hard to keep kids safe. She offers hope that people enduring great suffering can survive.³

She may have wished she could return those nine months of suffering for something else, but she has instead turned that experience into a way to offer hope to others.

This week I read a story in *The Elkhart Truth* about Alice and Teodoso Hernandez, a local couple who might wish to return ten years of separation. Teodoso crossed the U.S. border illegally in the 1990s, but he ended up in Elkhart and began working, where he met Alice, who became his wife in 2010. As they tried to make his stay here legal, they spent tens of thousands of dollars, with the result that he had to leave our country for ten years

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before his application process could be completed. His wife could not move with him due to the health of her parents, and so she sends money to her husband since no jobs exist in his town in Mexico.

Alice explained,

A lot of people, they buy names, work under different names and social securities... He didn't do any of that. He's been honest from the get-go. He was honest when he went to his [immigration] interview and told them 'Yes, I crossed the border.' Somebody who's trying to do everything right, to get 10 years. Our age. It's a lot. It wears on your body, your mind and your soul.⁴

I imagine she may have often wondered, "Could I return these ten years of separation from my husband for something else?"

Have you ever wished you could return painful experiences for something else? Jesus was born into

a world full of struggles, a world of powers that tried to kill him as a baby, a system of power that eventually hung him on a cross to die. I imagine he had days when he wished he could return those times of suffering. Maybe he even wishes his mother had returned those gifts of incense from the magi that foreshadowed his painful death. And yet, it's through those gifts that Jesus became like each of us: human, a life of struggles and pains. But those gifts also remind us to look beyond the struggles and to see that God is with each of us, for God knows what it's like to live on earth. Through the gift of Jesus, God has experienced our humanity, and that's a gift we don't want to return.

¹ "Star of Wonder" by David Levy, *Parade Magazine*, December 23, 2001, p. 8-9.

² Isaiah 60:1-3, 6, CEB.

³ Narrative Lectionary Program 2 2018-19 Worship Resources
© 2018 Clergy Stuff, p. 6.

⁴ Rasmus S. Jorgensen, "Couple separated by immigration rule Elkhart woman, other spouses call for reform," Jan. 2, 2019, www.Elkharttruth.Com/News/Couple-Separated-By-Immigration-Rule/Article_Fa47925b-B3d7-5bd7-86e4-D9eef6df0e1d.html