

Baggage

Christmas is coming.

It is always coming. Like death and taxes, it arrives whether we feel ready for it or not. Yet every year someone is whining about how much sooner it seems to come. Don't really know how you feel about Christmas – maybe you hanker for the good ole days when people had their priorities straight, perhaps the commercialism gets on your last nerve, or you might be one of those people who love every blessed minute of it. No matter. It is still coming. Perhaps the question should be: what you will do with Christmas? How will you choose to survive or thrive during this holiday season?

For many, the holidays mean travel. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, families will traverse untold miles to gather together in celebration (or irritation). And traveling leads to packing.

Christmas involves a lot of baggage. Probably more than any other holiday. When we travel at Christmas, we are often hauling much more than our own personal items, we are also ferrying gifts to and fro upon the earth.

Traveling that starts with a capital T and that rhymes with B and that stands for baggage.

Baggage infers much more than necessities.

Although it may be "luggage" upon arrival at the airport, when the airlines misplace it, we are suddenly dealing with baggage.

These are the things that we brought from home, accumulated along the way, think we can't live without, need in order to keep up our appearances, or represent gifts that we offer to others.

Oddly enough, we typically refer to all these items as luggage. But in the airports – you don't see signs for luggage claims. Nope, it is "baggage." It seems that luggage is a much happier word than baggage. No one is likely to end up in a psychologist's office discussing their life "luggage."

Over the next four weeks we will consider 4 different characters in the Christmas story and discuss the baggage that they dealt with in their lives. The Christmas scripture texts are fairly brief, so you will get to know them well before this study ends.

This week we will be looking at **Joseph** and considering his particular brand of "baggage."

With him in mind -

read Matthew 1:18 to the end of chapter 2 and all of Luke 2.

What do we know about Joseph?

[circle all that apply]

Joseph is a man that almost defies description. There are many more questions than answers. What we do learn about Joseph, though, is perhaps more important. A clear sense of character emerges in these limited passages.

What single adjective is used to describe Joseph in Matt. 1:19?

How would you describe his character based on these passages?

Joseph is:

- tall
- Cuban
- old
- disappointed
- in love
- rich
- religious
- a carpenter
- a plumber
- obedient
- faithful
- a quitter

FACT 1:

Mary and Joseph are pledged to one another.

FACT 2:

Joseph has not taken any liberties with his bride-to-be.

This is a mark of commitment. In this day and age as we watch the age of marriage climb to nearly 30, some religious leaders are complaining about the extended adolescence of “boys who know how to shave” yet delay the responsibility of providing for a family. But here is a man who fully intends to marry. He has given his pledge to protect and provide for Mary.

This is integral to the entire story. Had Joseph and Mary been intimate during this betrothal period, the divinity of the Christ could be questioned. But Joseph displays personal discipline, self-denial, and respect for Mary.

Look at Matt. 1:18 and 19 and list any emotions you would be feeling if you were in Joseph's shoes.

What does Joseph's unwillingness to expose Mary to public disgrace reveal about him?

Remember that Joseph is described as "righteous;" he is in "right standing" with God and his community.

FACT 3:

Joseph has the "right" to divorce this woman.

Describe a time when you willingly gave up your rights.

Read Luke 4:22. What does this verse tell us about what the community thought about Joseph?

He knows his options.

He knows the expectations.

He chooses against them.

How important is your personal reputation?

Joseph chooses to leave the baggage of tradition.

He gives up the option to stone Mary. Initially he opts for the quiet humiliation of divorce over the public vindication of his own honor ...until an angel shows up and explains God's plan.

Furthermore he leaves behind the baggage of dreams.

Whatever life he may have imagined with Mary when they were first pledged to one another will never come to be. This is not the dream he was following. What man anticipates marrying a woman who is currently pregnant with a child that he did not father? From the moment Joseph decides to obey the angel of the Lord, Joseph not only fulfills his pledge to Mary, he sacrifices his own reputation to do so.

week one: joseph

By now, all hopes of a big church wedding are gone.

Joseph and Mary's relationship will always be tainted with this early pregnancy. Surely Joseph did not dream of helping his young bride deliver her first child in the presence of livestock with a manger as his first cradle.

Any dreams of using his carpentry skill to provide nursery furniture are unfulfilled in this story. Joseph certainly did not anticipate uninvited shepherds showing up in the dead of night.

If any of these circumstances rattled him, the worst was yet to come.

For whatever reason, it is clear that having arrived in Bethlehem for a census, Mary and Joseph did not opt to go back home to Nazareth. Perhaps the drama of their relationship to friends and family was more than they were ready to face. Maybe they were out of funds. For whatever reason, when the Magi arrive, Joseph and Mary are settled nicely into a house in Bethlehem. By now, perhaps life is settling down.* Mary and Joseph are making a fresh start...until the Magi show up, when Joseph gets another instructive dream. This one is so startling that he wakes Mary and Jesus up in the middle of the night to leave.

How do you think these awkward circumstances affected Joseph's view of his ability to provide for and protect his family?

How much can you pack to leave in the dark of night? How much baggage did they manage to take?to go to a foreign country? ...where they do not know the language?

Joseph's passport is getting some stickers; he is fast becoming a world-class traveler.

We don't know how long Joseph and Mary live in Egypt but we do know that once they move back to Nazareth, and manage to lose the Son of God on a return trip from Jerusalem (*we would be reported to social services for less than this*), Jesus is 12 years old. It is entirely possible that they spent the better part of a decade in Egypt, which is a fairly long missionary assignment.

How do you think Joseph processed these emotions with his obedience?

Again, the **baggage of dreams** gets lost. Joseph surely never dreamed of living in Egypt with his new family. But he finds himself in a life that seems to have a direction of its own. Can you identify with that? Finally, when Joseph gets the all-clear to return to the homeland, his reaction is telling.

Despite the clear directive from the Lord to return, what emotions does Joseph have? (Matt 2:22)

In the end, after an incredibly wild ride, God brings Joseph full circle.

Joseph and Mary land right back in Nazareth.

They face small town dynamics where everybody knows everybody's business.

But...they bring a decade of God-directed experiences with them.

Joseph and Mary know both the joy and the fright of trusting in a living God.

*Based upon the age of the infants Herod chose to murder, we can surmise that the baby Jesus is under, but up to two years of age.

Parting thoughts-----

I am intrigued that Joseph's
"righteousness" did not guarantee him a
problem free life.

His great character traits did not fulfill his
dreams.

Yet when he was willing to walk away from
the bondage and the privileges of his
cultural traditions, Joseph's obedience
placed him smack dab in the presence of
the Almighty God.

Joseph gained access to the Son of God in a
manner that we can only imagine.

Obedience to God may not fulfill our
American dreams of prosperity or security,
but we can be guaranteed that

**obedience will bring us into the presence
of an Almighty God.**

Christmas often represents a time to spend with family.

For some of us – this is a fabulous thing. We get to see extended family, give gifts, laugh, and get caught up with each other’s lives. For some, there is a significant feeling of belonging attached to family celebrations; our own weirdness seems less weird when we notice other family members who look like us, talk like us, think like us, smell like us...well you get the idea. There is a special kind of relief in knowing that we are not the only people on the planet who carry our particular brand of baggage. We find comfort in our common quirks.

Some of us are reminded during the holiday season that we do not have the picture perfect family. We find ourselves stuck in some dysfunctional group of folks that we wish we could trade in for someone else’s family. And watching other people enjoy their celebrations does not ease the pain; it only makes our misery worse.

Yes, we *do* notice how much we look like, talk like, and think like our family, but it is not comforting; it is discouraging. We leave family gatherings determined NOT to be like them.

Family celebrations do not always produce warm fuzzy feelings. Sometimes they magnify the losses in our lives.

The Christmas season becomes a reminder of our own brokenness and our past and our inability to fix it.

Most of the year, we may successfully avoid certain family members. But the extended holidays, often force us together for untold numbers of hours, perhaps with excess food and drink providing ample opportunity for conflict.

Whether we relate to either of these extremes or something in the middle, **family can represent a particular type of baggage** in our lives.

It is the bag we don’t want to leave behind on the conveyor belt at the airport, because a lot of our familiar stuff is in there, but when we heft it off the circular baggage claim thingy, we are astounded at its weight.

How can such valuable and familiar stuff feel so heavy when we are obliged to drag it through a terminal? That’s the strange thing about baggage. Most of what is in there can be replaced. Seriously.

Clothes, old toothbrushes, toiletries of all sorts. Yet, we go ballistic if it comes up missing. Heaven help the airline that loses our bag. It is a terrible inconvenience. We are oddly attached to the stuff we pack along with us, even if it has little earthly value.

Not that family is something that we should casually discard, but the familiarity of family, comforting as it is, can be a weight on our lives when they do not offer the support we so desperately need at certain points in our lives.

This week we are going to look at Mary.

Let's try to grasp a fresh perspective of this important lady who has already had her fair share of scrutiny in church history. Let's try to look between the lines to understand how her family may have responded to the astonishing events in the Christmas story. We are not trying to add to the Gospel, but merely attempting to see through Mary's eyes and investigate the choices that she made. Let's consider what sort of **baggage** Mary's family represented.

*Reread the Christmas text:
Matt 1:18-25, Matt 2, Luke 1 and Luke 2: 1-20.*

Mary.

Sweet little Mary.

How do you picture this woman that God chose to carry his child? We honestly don't know her age, her appearance, her ACT scores, her interests, or abilities. All we can get, once again, is the insight we can gain from how she responded to the events of the Christmas story.

How does Mary respond to the angel's message?

When we sense God giving us clear direction or prompting, how do we respond?

What questions do we bring to God? Do we require details, explanation, and timelines? What assurances do we need before we choose to obey?

Mary is remarkable for what she does NOT say. Although she is troubled and wonders about a lot of things, she never expresses doubt, she merely seeks clarification. She actually *reminds* the angel of her virginity.* Since Mary is already planning a wedding, it is interesting that she does not ask whether Joseph will be the father, particularly since the angel's initial announcement doesn't exclude Joseph.

Mary also never asks for a timeline. I would have asked for a timeline. I would have wanted details. I would have wanted due dates and prenatal vitamins and an ultrasound to go.

Although, Mary does not ask for it, the angel freely gives her a timeline and even suggests a support system.

*Notice that the angel does not announce that she *is* pregnant, just that she *will* be pregnant.

Where is Mary's family in this whole story?
Is she an only child?
Does she have a mother and a father who
are planning this wedding with her?

There is simply no record of Mary telling her family members about this angelic visit. If she does have a loving and supportive family, why does Mary opt to immediately head for the hills rather than spend the first few months at home when she could have kept the pregnancy secret from the town? Even if she is trying to avoid Joseph, surely a loving and compassionate family could have protected her.

To be clear - there is no specific scripture indicating that her family did not support Mary or her story, but their absence from the story is glaring. Her family is not present for a baby announcement. They are nowhere to be seen on the night of Jesus' birth. And Mary and Joseph seem to be in no hurry to return to Nazareth after the birth nor after their stint in Egypt. What is clear, however, is where Mary chooses to go for support.

When faced with personal crisis in our own lives, where do we go for support? Who gets the first call? Why that person?

How does
Elizabeth
respond to
Mary when
she arrives?

*Does our
support
system
represent
other
believers or
do we find
support
among our
unbelieving
friends?
What
difference
does it
make?*

What does
Elizabeth
commend
Mary for?
(Luke 1:44)

Mary chooses to go straight to Elizabeth's house. She *hurries* there. Despite an obvious age difference, Mary finds affirmation and comfort from Elizabeth. Mary leaves behind the **baggage of her immediate family** to find support among those who understand what God is doing in her life. Instead of sulking at the lack of family support, she seeks and finds fellowship with like-minded believers. God uses Elizabeth's words to encourage Mary. Mary stays through Elisabeth's final trimester and likely assisted in John the Baptist's birth. God used the circumstances of Elizabeth's delivery to prepare Mary with the knowledge she would need for her own unassisted birth.

God is like that. He often uses the words of fellow believers and the circumstances of their lives to prepare us for the work he is completing in our lives.

It is Mary's belief that sets her apart. It is her willingness to let her life be used. She takes the long view as she considers how future generations will view her life.

What options did Mary have? Could she have said no? Was submission the only answer? Have you ever chosen not to respond to God's call on your life? How did that work out for you?

Parting thoughts-----

I wonder if Mary ever wanted a different family. I wonder if she ever questioned why God didn't place her somewhere else, maybe with parents like Elizabeth and Zachariah, people who can sense the Holy Spirit when someone walks in the room. How cool would that be? I also notice that Mary pondered a lot of things. Check out her response to the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna.

She was a thinker. If she had had the opportunity, I bet she would have been a journaler. She processed stuff. Moreover, she didn't complain. At least not out loud. If she compared her life to others, we don't know about it. She *believed* in what God was doing in her life.

She was along for the ride. I'm not suggesting that Mary was perfect or never had a doubt. But in her story I see God giving us a fabulous example of how to function when our primary support system fails us. He created the church.

Mary left behind the baggage of family and found her greatest sources of affirmation from those who recognized what God was doing in her life.

week three: shepherds

Has Christmas and all its trimmings invaded your workplace yet? The season can be pretty invasive particularly for the Scrooges among us.

Perhaps the office party has been planned – hopefully with less mayhem than Michael Scott would provide for his *Office*. Maybe you are looking forward to a long awaited Christmas bonus. Perhaps you are self-employed; set your own hours, chart your own course, raise your own kids, ring your own bell, whatever.

In a perfect world,
we love our jobs.
Our education, skills and
talents are put to good use.
At the end of our day, we
find fulfillment in using those
gifts. Our particular
occupation makes the world
a better place for all. And we
get paid handsomely for our
efforts; not that it matters
because we would gladly do
what we do all day long
without pay.

If this is you, be blessed.

*How will the
Christmas season
affect the
baggage of our
employment?*

*How will we rise
above the
commercialism,
office politics,
Christmas rush,
clamor for paid
vacation,
promise of
bonuses,
and overall stress
that often
accompanies the
holiday season?*

But all sarcasm aside, many of us participate in our employment because we need to provide for ourselves and those we love. Fulfillment, world peace and great salaries are a plus but not a given. We work to eat. And work represents yet another type of **baggage** in our lives.

We need it.
We guard it.
We dare not leave it unattended in an airport.

Sometimes it looks like every other bag on the conveyor belt and requires a personal tag to identify it as our own.

Let's consider how the shepherds dealt with the demands of their employment in the Christmas story.

*Read the account of the shepherds in
Luke 2: 1-20.*

week three: shepherds

Geography explains a lot.

Bethlehem is located a scant 6 miles south of Jerusalem. Jewish law and custom required Jews to periodically offer sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. Jews could certainly bring their own animals to sacrifice, but travel and distance complicated the effort. This is why a livestock market naturally developed near the temple courts.* The nearness of Bethlehem to Jerusalem suggests that the sheep being “watched in the fields nearby” were likely raised for sale as sacrificial lambs.

*See John 2: 13-16

Who are these guys and what does their job entail?

Where are these fields where the shepherds are living and watching their flocks?

What makes our work or employment meaningful?

So while shepherding was not exactly a high-end job, this particular group of shepherds could take pride in the fact that they helped fulfill Jewish law and religious custom. Their job was important.

Flocks needed watching at all times against predatory animals and thieves but this particular time may have required a heightened awareness. The census had created a massive population shuffle in the whole Roman world. Overcrowding prevented Joseph and Mary from securing a private room in an inn. One can only imagine where everyone else was setting up camp.

Needless to say, holiday traffic is really nothing new.

week three: shepherds

Then, the unbelievable happens. Sometime during the night, the glory of the Lord crashed into the mundane workplace of simple shepherds. These are third shift guys. Ever worked third shift? It's a unique experience. Nothing exciting ever happens on third shift. These folks are usually a little out of sync with the rest of the world. The shepherds probably aren't expecting anything more exciting than the risk of sheep rustlers in the middle of their watch. But instead, they find themselves face to face with a messenger from God.

Even good news can be terrifying. When we receive a very clear word from the Lord, it can be both exhilarating and intimidating. It is exhilarating to know that the Lord has spoken. But it is intimidating to realize that the ball is now in our court. If the word was clear, (how can we deny a host of singing angels and stuff) it is difficult to pretend that we didn't really hear the message.

The question is:
what do we do with the message?

How do the shepherds respond to the presence of the angel of the Lord?

What does the angel ask the shepherds to do?

What does it mean to leave the baggage of employment in order to come into the presence of the Savior?

What does it mean to "seek" him?

The angel announces the birth of the Savior but never really asks the shepherds to do anything.

Nothing.

Nada.

Instead, the angel anticipates the shepherds' reaction. The angel tells them they will "find" the baby, which is not going to happen unless they actually "seek" Him. They must get off their duff and go. Once the shepherds recover from their angelic concert, they discuss the plan among themselves. They decide to "go" and "see." Furthermore, there is a sense of urgency in their action. They "hurried off" to find a newborn baby in a crowded town of travel.

They leave the **"baggage of their employment"** to respond to God's call. Don't you have to wonder if they left anyone back on the ranch to watch the sheep? Was it the guy with the least seniority? Was it the guy least convinced by the angelic visit?

week three: shepherds

Now – this is not to suggest that we should all turn in our resignations tomorrow.

Rather, there seems to be a clear set of priorities presented here. The shepherds leave the baggage of their workplace in order to get close to Jesus. But once they find him, what do they do next? [verses 17 -20]

These men take their experience in the presence of God back to their workplace. God isn't just a weekend activity. It appears that the shepherds allow their lives to be transformed in the workplace as they continue to give God "glory" and "praise" for all that they have "heard and seen."

Ironically, the shepherds who make their living raising sacrificial sheep, participate in the event that will cost them their jobs.

The shepherds are the first visitors to see the Messiah. This is the Messiah who will become the ultimate sacrificial Lamb of God.

With the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, the shepherds' jobs will become obsolete. *Think about it* - their jobs will be outsourced to Jesus.

Notice that the shepherds' jobs do not transform into anything more special that they were the night before. The shepherds "return" to their mundane jobs.

No pay raises
No promotions
Just the same old, same old.

The difference is in their attitude and experiences. They are "glorifying and praising God for all they have seen and heard." They are letting the experiences of meeting God *away* from the workplace affect their behavior *in* the workplace.

They took Sunday morning back to work with them. Their coworkers can't help but notice that they have met the Savior, because they can't shut up.

Parting thoughts-----

It's hard not to love the enthusiastic response of terrified shepherds who pick up, leave their sheep, and search for a newborn infant in the crowded town of Bethlehem. The only clue they really get is that the baby is brand new and will be in a manger. I wonder how many babies they saw before they found the right one.

At this point, I have to sympathize with Mary and Joseph. It is a humbling thing to receive expected visitors immediately following delivery even when we *know* our guests. It is an entirely different thing to have strangers showing up to gawk at our infant.

Yet, God sends shepherds who probably didn't shower first, much less use hand sanitizer, to affirm the significance of this birth. Shepherds who respond to an amazing visit from angels and **leave the baggage of their work behind.**

And for their efforts, **they return with a God-experience that actually lightens the work they are called to do.**

If Christmas involves travel and travel requires baggage, then baggage leads to packing.

These days, when per bag fees can stack up particularly for bags over the weight limit, packing skills are important. Decisions abound.

How much clothing will you need? What will the weather be like? Jacket? Extra shoes? How about toiletries and hair appliances? Not to mention all our electronic devices and chargers. And because it is Christmas, what about gifts? This is when gift cards, jewelry and video games come in handy; they're light and take up virtually no space. Condolences to anyone packing gifts for a 2 year old.

And then there are items that need special attention and care. Perfume bottles, shampoo, and other liquids you may be packing and cannot take in a carryon bag. This is when even the person committed to living "green" often caves in and buys a zip-lock bag. We have to find a way to secure these items and limit damage to the rest of our belongings if something breaks.

For the indecisive person, packing can be a nightmare.

Finally, there are REALLY special items. Things we are unwilling to turn over to baggage handlers...like **guitars**.

And laptops.

And children.

(okay, maybe they aren't baggage). What about the special gift too delicate to pack so we carry it in our lap all the way?

*Gift giving is tricky. How do gifts at Christmas represent **baggage** to us?*

Maybe gift giving has gotten out of hand in our lives. Like the "Cranks" we would really like to skip Christmas. Leave it all behind. But we find ourselves trapped in a cycle of buying and giving in order to keep up appearances or avoid awkwardness. Maybe gift giving is a genuine way that we express our appreciation to family and friends once a year. Perhaps we spend hours making something or choosing the perfect item that represents someone's significance in our lives.

week four: magi

On a scale of 1 – 5, evaluate your current level of Christmas gift giving.

- 1 ---- really frugal (stingy)
- 2 ---- could step it up a bit
- 3 ---- just right
- 4 ---- I over do it a little bit but only because I like to
- 5 ---- way over the top

In the Christmas story, the Magi get the prize for having come the furthest to see Jesus. There should be some award for that. Don't we have to wonder how the Magi packed for their journey? In spite of all of the tradition that accompanies the visit of the Magi, there are only 12 verses about these men.

In spite of all the Christmas tradition surrounded the "Wise Men" notice what is there and what is missing as you read Matthew 2:1-12

What makes a perfect gift?

What is the best gift you ever gave?

Where do these men come from and what did they do?

Once again, geography and some history can give us some perspective. "From the east" leads most scholars to believe that the Magi were from Persia (modern day Iran) or Babylon. This nation was heavily influenced by Jews taken into captivity in 722 B.C. when Assyria conquered Israel.* By choosing intelligent young devout Jewish men to enter the king's service, it is likely that the Messianic prophecies become known in the Babylonian Empire.

Although we sometimes call the Magi** or Wise Men "Kings" (because we have really fun Christmas songs about them), nothing indicates that they were royalty. In fact the same word interpreted as Magi in the book of Matthew is interpreted as sorcerer or astrologer in other places in the Bible.

*Read Daniel 1:1-6.

**Originally a religious caste among Persians, Magi were devoted to astrology, divination and the interpretation of dreams. This led to an extension in the meaning of the word, and by the first century B.C. the terms magi and Chaldeans were applied generally to fortune tellers and to the exponents of esoteric religious cults through out the Mediterranean world. "magus" or "sorcerer" is the name give to Simon in Acts 8:9, to Bar-Jesus in Acts 13:6 and to Elymas in Acts 13:8. The legend of "the Three Kings" is late and medieval. NIV Archaeological Study Bible. Zondervan, 2005.

week four: magi

As stargazers, the Magi have seen something in the skies that indicated the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy and the birth of a new King of the Jews. The initial star sighting might have been a single astronomical event that occurred with the simultaneous birth of Jesus. The Magi mention to Herod that they saw a star, not that they were *following* a star. Then Herod attempts to calculate “the exact time” they saw the star, which apparently influenced his decision to kill all the children under two years in Bethlehem.*

We can estimate that the Magi traveled 500+ miles. The Magi may have headed to Jerusalem assuming that a royal King would be born in the capital city. Not a bad guess.

Or perhaps the location of the star gave them bearings allowing them to calculate where the baby could be found – in which case, their math was pretty sound, they only missed Bethlehem by 6 miles.

Pretty astounding.

*Given the small size of this town, scholars figure that perhaps only a dozen or so children were murdered. This fact does not make the act any less horrific; from Joseph and Mary’s perspective, the murders become much more frightening. Chances are that they knew and were friends with families who lost their babies in Herod’s massacre.

What motivates these men to go on this journey?

When exactly, and how many times do they see the star?

What does it take for you to consider leaving on a two-year journey?

How do you pack gifts for this length of a trip?

What kind of gifts do you take on a long journey?

Do you wonder how long it took them to pack for this journey?

The tradition of three men only comes from the number of gifts mentioned. Regardless, it is likely that an entire entourage of folks showed up in Jerusalem.

They created quite a ruckus.

Based on the age of Jesus when the Magi arrive at his house, we can suspect that the journey took them nearly two years. Part of this time may have included packing the **baggage**.

week four: magi

Now I get the first one.
CASH.

Cold hard cash is a good choice.
Who isn't happy to receive this gift?
Except a toddler.

As soon as we understand the value
of currency, cash is a good choice.
But I'm guessing a toddling Jesus was
less than impressed.
Just guessing.

What about Frankincense?
Honestly, I know this has nothing
to do with Frankenstein, but that's
where my mind goes. We don't
use a lot of Frankincense these
days but in Jesus' time, it was
incense typically used by the
priests in the temple.

Google it. It actually looks pretty
cool, like a bunch of little rocks.
That would travel well. But I'm still
not sure how exciting a gift this is
for a toddler.

The Magi
packed:

Gold

Frankincense

Myrrh

No kidding.

What makes
these odd
gifts
significant?

And then there was Myrrh.

Myrrh was anointing oil used for burial.
This is definitely the most morbid gift of
the three, although the symbolism is
obvious.

Do you wonder how this gift in particular
was packed? If we think *our* airline bags
get rough treatment, can you picture
these gifts jostling on the back of camels
– the airline of the day? There were no
zip lock bags to contain spillage or
Styrofoam packing peanuts to absorb
the shock. Here's hoping it arrived
intact. Mary probably had to put this gift
up on a shelf away from Jesus' little
fingers.

*Beyond the many interpretations
of how symbolic and useful these
gifts would turn out to be...
what else makes them perfect
gifts?*

week four: magi

Unlike the previous studies in which baggage represented items that we could or perhaps should leave behind, these gifts are part and parcel of the Magi's belongings.

The Magi found room in their luggage to include gifts for someone else.

This means that something else was displaced.

Perhaps one of the magi left his favorite pair of shoes behind to make room for his gift.

Regardless of the religious symbolism of the three gifts, all gifts reflect a portion of the giver.

When we make someone a homemade gift using our own talents to construct it, the gift carries the loving care that we put into every aspect of its construction. If we spend time building, crafting, or cooking, we often spend that time thinking of the person who will receive it.

Even when we buy gifts outright, the gifts represent a portion of our lives. The money that we spend equals a certain number of man-hours and personal labor. Again, this is a personal sacrifice of time and effort, which we exchange for a gift that we offer to others.

We never get those man-hours back –

Whether we use the money for the gift or our skill for the gift:

How can we simplify our lives in order to make room for gifts that we are offering to others?

gifts

represent

sacrifice.

At Christmas, it is easy to think of others. Our culture kind of demands it. We think of gifts for our children, our extended family, our employees, the pizza guy, the needy.... but what about the rest of the year?

What would our lives look like if we were willing to sacrifice a couple years of our lives truly *seeking* Jesus?

What if we purposely left some things out of our lives to make room for sacrifices of time that are offered to others?

Maybe this is why Christmas is so hectic for a lot of us. Too often we want to give of ourselves to others during the holiday season without eliminating anything else in our busy lives to do it.

Parting thoughts-----

At the risk of presenting an entirely new thought, here's an entirely new thought.

For me,

the best part of the story is Herod's instruction to the Magi, "*Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.*"

This is incredible. Herod doesn't want to leave his throne to do the hard work of seeking. He will leave that to others. He is happy to receive the report: the evidence of those who have actually been in the presence of the Christ.

Those who have sacrificed and **offered the gifts carried in their own baggage** by laying them at Jesus' feet.

How many of us are happy to keep our own lives uninterrupted and leave the *seeking* to someone more dedicated than ourselves?

BAGGAGE:

A CHRISTMAS STUDY

Vineyard Community Church Richmond
2010

by Janice Wood
cover design by Ben Keeling

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A vintage suitcase, possibly made of metal or a textured material, is shown lying on a dark wooden surface. The suitcase has a handle and latches. A bright green vertical banner is overlaid on the image, containing the word "BAGGAGE" in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The left side of the image is a plain white background.

BAGGAGE