

The Journey of the Magi
Matthew 2:1–23
Saturday, January 8, 2023 (Epiphany)

Let us pray: May your word be the star that illuminates our way and leads us to you, in Christ.
Amen.

This past Monday, I was out for a walk around our neighborhood in the morning. And it wasn't too long into the walk before I started noticing something. House after house had their Christmas trees out on the curb for the trash to pick up. Now, we were *still* in the *season* of Christmas. That lasts for twelve days until Epiphany, which we celebrated on Friday. But for all those people in my neighborhood, Christmas ended with the new year, and it was time to move on to the next thing – football playoffs, Valentine's Day (stores are already stocking Valentine's Day candy and decorations). I was in one store that already had *Easter* candy out. Easter is not until April 9, still *three months* away. Much to Jen's dismay, the radio stations have stopped playing Christmas music, and the Hallmark Channel stopped showing Christmas movies and went back to *Golden Girls* marathons.

Our culture spends three months building up to Christmas, and then we squeeze the whole thing into one day. We have the wise men showing up in the nativity, which is probably not biblically accurate, and then the trees are out on the curb. And we miss the *journey*. But the *journey* is so critically important. *How* we get there is just as important as *where we end up*. And if we embrace the *season* of Christmas and the journey of the magi toward Epiphany – toward the revealing of God's light to the world – it can teach us something about how to live patiently and faithfully in this world.

In 1927, T.S. Eliot wrote a poem called “The Journey of the Magi.” It is an incredibly imaginative account of the magi’s journey to pay homage Christ, told from the perspective of one of the wise men years later. I read it every year on Epiphany, and I want to read it to you today, because I think this poem can actually help us understand something about seeking and finding and following Christ. There are three sections in the poem, representing three stages of the magi’s journey. I’m going to read a section, unpack it a little bit, before moving on to the next section. So this is “The Journey of the Magi.”

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

That one line really sums up the first section: “A hard time we had of it.” He is remembering years later how difficult the journey was. The weather was bad and made traveling hard. The camels they rode were difficult, and the men who worked with the camels were even *more* difficult. At one point the camel men just run away and leave them. There were things they had to leave behind – warm weather and luxurious palaces where girls wearing silk brought them sherbet. There was nowhere for them to stay along the way, so they ended up traveling through

the night and sleeping whenever they could. And all the while they are remembering all the people who told them that this journey was just a stupid idea. Maybe they were right.

“A hard time we had of it.” And *we* can have a hard time of it, too. Our journeys to Christ can be difficult. Whether it is the journey that leads us to Christ in the first place, or the journey of faith that we are *ultimately* making to Christ, it can be hard. There are things that we have to leave behind, sacrifices that we have to make. We have to leave behind the old life that was familiar and comfortable and safe. There’s a sense in which we have to leave behind the pleasures of this world that other people don’t even think twice about. Jesus said, “Those who want to follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross.” We view crosses today as *decorative*, but for Jesus and his followers, the cross was an instrument of *suffering*. Jesus tells us that the road is *hard* that leads to life. And there are always going to be those voices around us saying that this is all a fairy tale and we’re just wasting our time; that it’s all *folly*.

T.S. Eliot was one of the premier poets of the 20th century – perhaps the *best* – but he was not a person of faith. He was so popular because he gave voice to the disillusionment that people were feeling in the post-WWI era, when people saw the horrible death of that war (over 14 million dead) and questioned the existence of God. But earlier in 1927, the year that he wrote this, something happened to Eliot, and he became a Christian. This was the first poem he published that bore witness to that; no one really knew about it until then. He was sitting in church one morning, thinking about the journey of the magi, and when he went home, he wrote this poem in 45 minutes. And when it was published, his friends and colleagues *rejected* him. The author Virginia Woolf said, “poor dear Tom Eliot is dead to us all from this day forward.” Author Conrad Aiken, a friend of Eliot’s since college, thought he had gone crazy. That it was all just

folly. The journey of the magi was *his* journey, and it was a *hard* one, and it cost him a lot to make it.

What have you had to leave behind to seek Christ? What do you *still* need to leave behind? The journey of faith can be hard. And we don't even have a *star* guiding us. We're just out there trying to find our way in the dark. But that's not where the journey ends. Because after such a long, hard first part of the journey, the wise man goes on to say in the next section:

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

They come out of the cold, barren wilderness into a place that is warm and teeming with life. They stop at a tavern where they're trying to get information about where to go; where to find the child who is born King of the Jews. But no one knows anything. So they move on, and eventually, they find the place. The funny thing is, this is the section where they actually *find Christ* – the purpose of their journey is fulfilled; it *wasn't* all just folly – and he doesn't even *mention* it. He doesn't even say that they found *Christ*, just that they found “the place.” It's not some big, grand moment. There aren't choirs of angels singing. He simply says it was “satisfactory.”

Satisfactory! If you were able to go back and stand in the presence of the Christ-child, would you describe it as *satisfactory*? No, you'd say it was *amazing, incredible, unbelievable!* But see, it wasn't even clear to the magi what they had experienced. It wasn't a major awakening or

change, although as we'll find out in the next section, they were definitely changed. But it took them *years* to figure out what they had experienced; to make sense of it.

In *our* journeys of faith, it is rarely the big, grand moments of awakening that transform us. It is the small, simple, ordinary, everyday experiences of grace and forgiveness and understanding, that we can't always make sense of at the time. It isn't until much later that we're able to look back and see how this moment, this experience transformed my life. The journey is slow. It is gradual. But it is still worth it. Each moment of our lives is just one step in a much larger journey. So be patient. Don't expect too much. Don't expect the big, majestic spiritual experience. The magi were not trying to have a big spiritual experience. They were just seeking Christ. And so with *us*, don't seek a spiritual experience. Seek Christ. Seek to *know* Christ. Seek to *love* Christ. Seek to *serve* Christ. Pay attention. And be satisfied with what is given.

So we come to the final section of the poem, where the magi says:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

All these years later, he's still not exactly sure what it was they saw – a birth or a death. The *easy* thing to say here is that this is a child who was born to *die*. That Christ came into the world to die for our sin. But that's not what the magi is saying here. He's not talking about *Christ's*

death. He's talking about *his own*. He says, "This birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, *our* death." Something about the birth of Christ has brought about a death in them.

Today is the day we celebrate Epiphany, when the glory of God was revealed to the nations through the magi. But today is *also* Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the day we remember Jesus being baptized by John, the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him." And *baptism* is about *birth* and *death*. It marks the beginning of the Christian journey, a new life with God. But it also marks the *end* of the *old* life, as Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

And in baptism, we are united with Christ in *his* death and resurrection. We are buried with Christ in the waters of baptism and raised to new life. So in baptism, birth and death are inherently connected. Every new beginning brings with it an ending of what was before. And every ending gives way to a new beginning.

What T.S. Eliot understands and shows us here is that with the birth of Christ a new world was born, and an old world died.¹ The magi go back home, but they're not *at home* anymore. It doesn't feel the same. It says they are "no longer at ease here, in the old dispensations," the *old* way of ordering the world. Because in Christ the world has been *reordered* according to the power and authority and rule and reign and will of God. They are surrounded by "alien people," people who are strangers, foreigners to them, "clutching their gods," these idols that they now realize are meaningless and powerless.

¹ Brian Zahnd, *The Anticipated Christ: A Journey Through Advent and Christmas*, pg. 155

And so like the magi, we have witnessed the birth of Christ. We have been born anew in him, beginning a new life with God. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God, our lives ordered according to the power and authority and rule and reign and will of Christ. And yet...we still have to live here, in the kingdom of man, surrounded by an alien people clutching their gods. The gods of money and material possessions. The gods of power and violence. The gods of fear and control and worldly pleasure. That's the *old* dispensation, the *old* way of ordering things, that *we* know is false. It is fraudulent. It is all just folly. There is no real *life* there. There is *life* in love and forgiveness and mercy and kindness and justice and service, giving of ourselves that others might have what they need to live the fullness of life.

On this journey to Christ – *with* Christ – we still *live* in the kingdom of man, but we are no longer *at home* here. When we enter into a new life with Christ, the voice of God speaks to *us* and says, “This is my Son, the beloved, *listen to him*. Do not listen to *them*, ordering your lives according to the false promises of this world. Listen to *him*.” We don't *need* to clutch the false gods of power and control and materialism, because on this journey to Christ, we trust God to guide our steps. As God did for the magi.

The poem ends with the wise man saying, “I should be glad of another death.” He's no longer at home in this world, and he can't wait to die to go be with God. This is the only place I think Eliot gets it wrong. Certainly we look forward to the day when we will live forever in the presence of God. But we can't just abandon this world and wish our lives away. Because in this world, in this life, there is *beauty* and *goodness* and *wonder* and *love* and *possibilities* and *hope*. And God has given us this short span of life to make the most of it. To live and love in ways that might transform. We should be glad of another *life*. A new life lived here and now with Christ, and when that life ends, another life in his eternal presence.

The journey is hard, and it will absolutely cost us something. But it is *so* worth it, to have our eyes opened and find the places in *this world* and *this life* where God dwells with us, in Christ.

Amen.