

ASSF 5th January 2020

Matthew 2 1-12

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit Amen

I wonder what they saw in the sky that first night. What was it that got them thinking? What was it that motivated them to pack and begin a journey to who knew where? Something had been revealed to them. But what was it? Was it in the sky, in their mind, in their heart?

The Season of Christmas is in three parts – Advent which is the period of waiting and anticipation, Christmas Day when we celebrate the birth of Jesus and now the Epiphany when the reality of what that birth means is revealed. It is the end point of the Nativity story – and the beginning of Jesus' story.

T.S. Eliot's *The Journey of Magi* is the story of the journey to the Christ child and back again. But furthermore, it's the story of what that journey does deep inside the poem's narrator who is one of the magi. Eliot wrote this poem as a type of Christmas card, during a period of deep faith around his conversion to Anglicanism. In writing about this poem, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams remarked, "Eliot never wanted to present religious faith as a nice cheerful answer to everyone's questions, but as an inner shift so deep that you could hardly notice it, yet giving a new perspective on everything and a new restlessness in a tired and chilly world."

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, sorefooted, 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.

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 arriving at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

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.

We don't have much historical information about these wise men and their journey. St. Matthew says they came from the East. Some have speculated they were from Persia. We like to think that there were three of them but St. Matthew doesn't say that and the number has varied throughout

the church's history; 2, 3, 4, 8, even 12. We call them Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar but those names didn't come about until the seventh century. And what about "the star?" It has been viewed as a supernatural phenomenon, just a regular star, a comet, or sometimes as a conjunction or grouping of planets.

This anonymity and lack of historical information is a reminder that this story, this Epiphany journey, is not just the wise men's journey; it is everyone's journey. The truth of scripture is never limited to or contained only in the past.

I don't know what was in the sky, what they saw, that first night. I don't know what was in their minds; what they thought, asked, or talked about. I don't know what was in their hearts; what they felt, dreamed, or longed for. But I know that there have been times when we each have experienced Epiphany; times when our night sky has been lit brightly, times when our minds have been illumined, times when our hearts have been enlightened. Those times have revealed to us a life and world larger than before. They have been moments that gave us the courage to travel beyond the borders and boundaries that define our lives. Epiphanies are those times when something calls us, moves us, to a new place and we see the face of God in a new way; so human that it almost seems ordinary, maybe too ordinary to believe.

That's what happened to the wise men. They began to see and hear the stories of their lives. Something stirred within them and they began to wonder, to imagine, that their lives were part of a much larger story. Could it be that the one who created life, who hung the stars in the sky, noticed them, knew them, lived within them, and was calling them? Could it be that the light they saw in the sky was a reflection of the divine light that burned within them, that burns within each one of us?

I am going to finish my Epiphany thoughts with this. Pope Gregory the Great, studied the Magi and he was deeply affected by the idea that the Wise Men had to return by a different route. He commented that this is true of all of us: that having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came. An encounter with Jesus, in whatever form it takes, must affect us so profoundly, that we must be changed by it. We cannot go back to what we were before, and our lives must take a different route.

As 2020 begins, and we leave the old year behind, I'd like that to be the thought that we leave here with, this morning. Let's take a different route this year, having encountered the Christ-child this Christmas time, and start our journey afresh with him.

To seriously consider these questions is to begin the journey. That journey took the wise men to the house where they found the answer to their questions in the arms of his mother, Mary. We may travel a different route than the wise men did but the answer is the same.

God notices us, knows us, lives within us, and calls us. God is continually revealing himself in and through humanity, in the flesh. These are the stories of our lives, epiphanies that forever change who we are, how we live, and the road we travel. They are moments of ordinary everyday life in which God is revealed in humanity and we see glory face to face.