

“Wannabe Magi?”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
The Feast of the Epiphany – 6 January 2009
Matthew 2:1-12

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 when 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 dirty 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 wineskins.
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.

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.

What a wonderful imagination T. S. Eliot exercises as he strives to fill out these mysterious figures, mere silhouettes under the brightness of the star that led them. Many legends have grown up around the wise men: that there were three, when in fact Matthew doesn't tell us how many journeyed from the East, only that there were three gifts; that they were kings, when Matthew identified them as magi, who certainly lived well, often in the employ of royalty thanks to their knowledge of astronomy and mathematics and astrology and other occult practices, but not kings in their own right.

We can barely say anything about them confidence, except that they came from the East following some strange celestial phenomenon to which they ascribed a special meaning, that they asked Herod for help, eventually found the baby Jesus, coughed up some very expensive presents, and were warned in a dream to go home a different way. Apart from that, we know nothing. They never again appear in scripture, not even a wistful mention by the Gospel writer who brought them to our attention in the first place.

Of course, they serve many purposes for Matthew. The appearance of the magi from afar signified that Jesus was of cosmic significance. His life would impact not just his own tribe or nation, but every tribe and nation, offering salvation to both Jew and Gentile.

The gifts were symbolic, too. Gold was naturally associated with royalty, foreshadowing the power Jesus would one day display. Frankincense had long been used

as offerings to God in a variety of religious traditions, including Judaism, where it was solemnly burnt in the inner sanctum of the Temple in Jerusalem. Myrrh was a bit darker, both in color and intent. This gum resin was often used to embalm bodies and help cover the odor of their decay. The gifts were symbols of kingship, of death, and of a sanctity achieved from sacrifice.

But what fascinates us most about the magi is not their exotic allure as strangers from afar initiated into spiritual mysteries of an ancient age, nor the pricey gifts they brought. No, what really makes the magi compelling for us is how much we resemble them, despite all the differences.

We, like them, seek out Christ in our lives and in our world, and we envy them the heavenly star that made it seemingly so easy to find Jesus and understand at some level his true significance. Yet we, like them, are often given signs that show the presence of Jesus. Quite often we see the signs and follow them, but sometimes, we miss the signs pointing us toward Jesus, just as most magi alive back then did.

You see, only a few of the star-gazers noticed the star as something out of the ordinary, and for those who noticed, fewer still perceived its importance, and of those who perceived its importance, only a few correctly interpreted its meaning. Perhaps there were even a few magi who saw the star, perceived its importance, and correctly interpreted its meaning, but for whatever reason, simply didn't follow the star.

Much of the same could be said of us. We often miss the signs of where Jesus is, or we see the sign and fail to recognize its importance, or we misinterpret the sign, or we interpret the sign correctly, but for whatever reason, fail to follow it to Jesus.

So we are attracted to the magi, not only because we are like them, but also because we aspire to become more like them, for all too often we are like the other magi – those who stayed at home and avoided the tough journey so eloquently described by T. S. Eliot.

We like the comfort of the familiar. We like being at ease, undisturbed by ideas and realities that might threaten our way of viewing the world and living day to day. All this, the magi left behind, following a rough road, if Eliot has it right, which he does, for travel in those days could be terribly risky and hard, much closer to the root word it shares, “travail,” than what we experience today in our climate-controlled, cushion-seated cars and planes.

We prefer to think of faith as a place where we can settle down, when faith is a journey instead, a quest for new horizons of understanding and righteous behavior and loving relationship, a constant struggle to avoid the wrong turns occasioned by sinful diversion. The life of faith is less about sitting up to stay, and more about getting up to go. It’s about following the light, so we can get out of the darkness.

What we find in that light is a vision of our own best selves, cast in the image of Jesus, and like the magi of Eliot’s imagining, we too might find that in Jesus death and birth are not so unlike each other. Indeed, for those who follow Jesus beyond the manger and out into the world, nothing less than rebirth is required, and that second birth means that we must die to our old selves and be raised to a new life of grace.

That rebirth may occur in a revelatory instant of conversion, or it may involve a more gradual process of discernment and discovery, but our rebirth in Jesus must be made real each and every day, until we, like those original magi become wise enough to

recognize that we are “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,” because once we’ve seen Jesus, we can’t get back home by the same way we came, possibly because once we’ve seen Jesus, home isn’t where it used to be.

We may not want that much agitation: searching for the signs, discerning their truth, following the light, finding the child, offering up our gifts, dying to our old selves, being reborn anew, travelling home by another way. But such is the path of wisdom and discipleship, the path of life that brings peace and joy. Amen.