

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.  
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.  
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.

from Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot 1909-1962 (Faber, 1974),

In 1927, T.S. Eliot published *The Journey of the Magi* in which one of the magi or wise men tells us about their journey from the East. The number of the Magi is not given and their gifts for royalty-- gold, frankincense, and myrrh-- are not mentioned. The focus is elsewhere: Eliot asks us to reflect on the raw nature of the journey itself -- refractory camels, night fires going out, camel drivers wandering off, strange places filled with hostility or high prices. And he asks us to consider that these physical challenges are also underscored by internal ones. In the midst of the journey, the Magi are filled with a sense of loss. Eliot has the Magi narrator tell us:

**There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet**

Reality bows to idealized visions of the past, including silken girls and sherbet and this sense of regret and loss is joined by internal messages in the minds of the travelers -- messages that suggest that these travelers are fools:

**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.**

This modern retelling of an ancient story asks us to approach the ancient one from a new and perhaps challenging perspective. In our liturgical setting this morning, the three wise men glide effortlessly towards the anticipated home to gather around the Christ child in Bethlehem, the last arrivals. And we love it that way. But their story, even in the Biblical record of St. Matthew's Gospel, harbors a darkness that we may not choose to consider: King Herod.

After reading some commentaries and the text one more time, I wandered out into the church office to join Terrie on Thursday in looking over the newsletters for January. And as I sat down, I commented casually *You know, that King Herod was one, mean dude.* Terrie obliged by laughing instead of perhaps responding more accurately with something like -- Duh.....

Eliot has the wise men at the end possessed of a great deal of anxiety and drivenness. They sleep in snatches, they travel through the darkness of the night. And Matthew matches this anxiety with an environment colored by a sense of uneasiness and menacing danger.

The regal personages from the East, when they visit the local despot, do not realize that their message about new ruler being born will push Herod's paranoia button about being eliminated by an upstart. They do not know Herod. Professor Jan Schnell Rippentrop writes: **This man [Herod], ... is unlikely to favorably receive news that a baby is to be born with a right to Herod's rule. Furthermore, Herod is used to getting rid of people who don't serve his ambition. He:**

- had ten wives,
- ordered multiple assassinations, including assassinations of some of his own sons, and,
- changed succession plans multiple times as he decided who would take his throne when he died.

Menacing danger... In Matthew, the Magi have their dreams about returning to Herod and pay attention. Joseph and Mary flee the oncoming bloodbath. But Eliot's version of the journey still begs the question about journeys themselves.

Journeys change us, influence us, form us.

One thinks of the Abraham and his kin leaving Haran. Of the children of Israel, raised in slavery in Egypt, finding their identity over forty years of wilderness wandering, a difficult process. Some journeys are dramatic, replete with visions and conscious turning points. Others are much more subtle and enigmatic. Some are tragic and yet still formative.

The wise men return to their home country both the Gospel of Matthew and in Eliot's poem. But in Eliot's poem they are changed. Already in the midst of the journey, the poet provides us with religious references to the Christian tradition, infusing his own faith perspective and ours into their journey. Crucifixion and passion are present in his references to *three trees on the low sky*.

Then *An old white horse galloping away in the meadow* brings us to The Book of Revelation.

This is followed in turn by these lines:

**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....**

Here we are reminded of the blood on the lintel during the Passover meal which Eliot now covers with vine leaves reminding us of Eucharist and of Jesus' comment *I am the vine, you are the branches*. The dicing for pieces of silver brings us again to the Passion while the empty wine skins reminds us of Jesus statement that new wine can never be stored in old wine skins that will crack and burst open.

Finally they arrive from their long and arduous journey. And here the most significant question about their journey (and ours) emerges. It is the question about the difficulty of faith and of being formed:

**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.**

The priest Henri Nouwen once wrote that in every moment, sorrow and joy meet and kiss. At the end of this poem, Eliot brings together birth and death in the same way. It is almost as if he imagines the wise men to have immense powers of perception, such that they can see in the baby Jesus, both regal bearing and rule and also his eventual crucifixion. Their encounter with Jesus changes the Wise Men. The Magi narrator says *this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.*

Changed and formed in new ways, the Magi head home.

**We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.**

When we speak of fostering a spiritual journey as we do here at Trinity. Let us be aware that journeys can be difficult, even spiritual ones. And that they have the power to change us.

Too often we imagine that the journey of faith is easy or that the journey of faith will bring only happiness and peaceful existence. We want to forget the tough words of Jesus about carrying crosses and to forget the deep religious truth about the need to let go. But new life and possibility come through the demise of the old.

To be a Christian is to be asked to let go, to find one's identity through a journey of faith. This should not surprise us. Jesus speaks repeatedly about losing one's life to gain it. We are asked to take up our crosses and follow him. But he also promises presence. He asks us to come unto him with our burdens and invites us to learn from him. And he tells us that his burden is light.

In the name of God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.