

Blessed be God who animates our lives and sends holy messengers, angels and stars, to illuminate our way to Christ. AMEN

The past 11 days, tomorrow being the 12th day of Christmas and technically the feast of the Epiphany, have been dotted with angels and stars. Messages and messengers from God have broken into the world of the characters in Scripture and into our own. The times of darkness enshrouding the birth of the Christ child were much like ours, filled with depression, oppression and despair. Yet glimmers of divine hope have come in the form of showings from God pointing us to the way of love, the way of hope. Angels and stars guide and light our way pointing toward a destination like the manger in Bethlehem but helping us realize it is as much about the turning, the going, the journeying as it is about the destination. It is about the way, the path, the road and the assurance shining on our darkness and through our darkness.

Many of us have images of the magi we carry just as we summon images of the baby, Mary, the animals, etc. I personally go to a Rubens painting of the magi adoring the Christ child which overwhelms the altar at Kings College in Oxford. And I also go to the classic poem The Journey of the Magi by T. S. Eliot. It is, unlike the painting, so earthy and mundane, so real and unglorified, as to leave glory and mystery and adoration and holiness to the imagination. It reads as though one could be anywhere especially in its reference to cold when while Bethlehem might have been cold it is not the first hardship one thinks of. Bear with me as I read it to you in full. (I have also left copies of it at the back of the church if you care to ponder it more fully)

The Journey Of The Magi by T.S. Eliot  
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

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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.

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A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:

It seems to me that we are like the magi or we might be when we discern in the midst of cold and darkness, in the midst of death and dis-ease, something beckoning toward birth, life, divinity. These everyday epiphanies, like THE EPIPHANY, are showings of God. Eliot's poem seems to make the holy mysterious story accessible to each and every one of us to recall a journey in difficult unplanned for times and ways which rendered something enlightening. Moreover it is to recall a calling to travel inwardly or outwardly from something like an angel and guided by something like a star.

And it also seems to me that Eliot has captured the pattern of epiphany which is the pattern of our faith that when we make the journey to Christ, though hard, we encounter something holy and lifegiving and at the same time realize a death of former ways and expectations.

When they had knelt and adored and realized they had met the Christ child, they went home by another way. This may of course simply mean they discovered a better route, but I believe this different way has to do with going home differently, changed, transformed, They had died to their old ways, their old beliefs, their old selves and idols. Again, their eyes had seen the saviour...they left in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Eliot also makes it clear that this peace is difficult, this other way is not a yellow brick road, they now bear the weight of divinity as well as its lightness of being. And so, I wonder whether home was not also different:  
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.

The story of the magi, the stories of epiphanies which are authentic, are stories of divine transformation and the aftermath. They are like stories of annunciation, conversion and burning hearts, experiences of revelation from which we are forever changed.

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The question for us today is how do we respond: to the journey of the magi, to our own epiphanies?

one thing which occurs to me is that we recognize this holy pattern in our lives and especially in worship.

Every Sunday whether it is christmas or epiphany, easter or ordinary time, we travel like the magi to this sanctuary to meet or remeet Christ as though for the first time. We follow a course set for us by our God, illuminated for us by the Holy Spirit, and we show up. We show up for a variety of reasons but my guess is that there is an angel in there somewhere; we may be aware or unaware of this holy stranger! nevertheless we arrive bearing gifts and lay them at the altar, not just gifts of offering, but our selves our souls and our bodies. Something happens. Sometimes subtle and sometimes it knocks us backwards. No matter the depth we are witnesses to God's grace and compassion. We leave forgiven, restored and free, again at different levels; certainly transformed.

And we go home by a different way. Even if the same road, a different way.

I invite you to try on this pattern of wisdom more intentionally. During this season of Epiphany and beyond, show up, pay attention, and then choose a different way to journey spreading love and peace in this world. Be the angels, be the stars, illuminate those you touch with the brilliance and radiance of the Holy Spirit.