

**ELIOT AND THE MAGI**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on January 5, 2020, the Second Sunday after Christmas, at  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'*

*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '*

*Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'*

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

I.

In December of 1984, I had been preaching five or six times a year as an Associate Pastor in a large church in West Texas. Along the way, I had encountered T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi," and decided to use it for an Advent Sermon in early December that year.

Incorporating that poem into the sermon was the first time I recall being aware of how powerful a poem can be about a text or event or person in the Bible, especially when the author is able to "get inside the skin" of one of the characters.

I have decided to revisit that poem as we follow the journey of the wise men – or Magi – to the place Jesus was born on the day before Epiphany on which their journey is remembered.

A little background to the poem:

- T. S. Eliot was one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. He was a classically trained literary scholar, and in 1927, at age 39, he converted to Christianity through the Anglican Church. “The Journey of the Magi” was the first poem he published after his conversion.
- The poem is told through the voice of one of the Magi – many years after the journey, near the end of his life. His reflections on why he followed the star to the place the Messiah was born are mixed and profound.

The Journey of the Magi, by T. S. Eliot<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi,” published in 1927. From <https://allpoetry.com/The-Journey-Of-The-Magi>. The poem was originally published as part of 38 pamphlets by several poets entitled *Ariel Poems*, by Faber and Faber.

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.

## II.

Initially, the poem grips us because *our* image of the Magi are stately men, riding upright on camels, moving slowly but surely across the desert, following a bright star against the night sky.

But what Eliot allows us to see is that their initial journey was not only difficult, but filled with doubt.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey...

As they travel across the desert, they endure physical hardship:

The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.

They think about better times:

The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.

And then they contrast that *with* the view before them and the company in which they are riding:

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...

Perhaps, more than the physical hardship they face in their journey is the hardship of *doubt*:

...voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

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In the second stanza, things look up a bit for these journeying Magi:

“Dawn” breaks.

They come to a “temperate valley,” with the smell of “vegetation,” “a running stream” and “a water-mill beating the darkness” – signs of industry, commerce, civilization.

But soon other, darker sights come into view:

“...three trees on the low sky...”

“...an old white horse gallop[ing] away in the meadow...”

“...vine-leaves” over the door of a tavern

“...hands dicing for pieces of silver...”

“...feet kicking empty wineskins.”

People versed in scripture recognize the symbolism of these sights:

- Three trees//three crosses.<sup>2</sup>
- The white horse of the apocalypse.<sup>3</sup>
- “I am the vine...”<sup>4</sup>
- Judas betrayal Christ for thirty shekels of silver.<sup>5</sup>
- Roman soldiers gambling for his garment as he is hanging on the cross.<sup>6</sup>
- “No one pours new wine into old wineskins.”<sup>7</sup>

As the Magi get closer to the birth of Christ, images and symbols of his life, teaching, suffering, death, resurrection, and promised return come into play. We cannot visit the manger without being cognizant of the cross; we cannot behold the death without holding fast to the resurrection as well.

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As the third stanza opens, years have passed. The old Magus is nearing the end of his days. He is reflecting on why he went on the journey, what he saw, what it meant for him over the course of his life.

“...I would do it again,” he says.

But “set down this...set down this”:

“...were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death?”

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:32.

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 6:2.

<sup>4</sup> John 15:2, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:15.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 27:35.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 2:22.

Then he reflects:

“I had seen birth and death,” he says, “But had thought they were different...”

Instead, he realizes that “this Birth” is different from other births he has seen, for this birth also involves a death.

What the old wise Magus realizes is that accepting the birth of Jesus as the birth of the Messiah, as the birth of “God with us”, means *walking away from, giving up*, allowing *to die* certain things in our lives:

- Certain assumptions about what is right and wrong, what is good and just
- Certain images and understandings we have of who we are
- Certain images and understanding we have of the way the world is
- Certain practices we have adopted or avoided
- Certain scars we have carried or grudges we have born.

The birth of Christ *to us, within us, impacting us* in ways we have never before conceived, is a beautiful and welcome thing. “I would do it again,” the Magus says. But it also involves death: a death to old ways of doing things, old ways of seeing, old ways of being. “The past is finished and gone,” the apostle Paul later writes, “Everything has become fresh and new.”<sup>8</sup>

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Once the Magus had given his life over to the Christ whose birth he has beheld, he describes what comes next:

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

Good people of Westminster: the more significant the Messiah becomes for us, the more we realize that there are places we used to fit in in which we no longer fit in, “kingdoms” we used to visit that do not seem quite as royal or lavish as they used to seem, or whose royalty and lavishness do not seem quite as important to us as it once did. In fact, returning home from beholding the birth of the Messiah, we sometimes grow to feel we are in the midst of “an alien people clutching their gods.”

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<sup>8</sup> II Corinthians 5:17.

### III.

The last line of the poem is worthy of a separate reflection/

“I should be glad of another death,” the Magus says.

I have listened to recordings of Eliot reading the poem, and of some of his contemporaries reading it as well. All of them seem to end on a quiet, somber note, understandable as they are contemplating death; but their tone and mood seem less hopeful than I know I want to be if circumstances place me in a position to contemplate mine.

Now it is not really up to the preacher or the poet to say what mood we *should* be in as we face our death.

- I have known people – and you probably have as well – who know the end is near and have come to a *peaceful acceptance* of that reality.
- I have known people who are tired and beaten down by this life and *want it all to be over*.
- I have known people whose suffering is tremendous and *want their suffering to come to an end*.
- I have also known people who believe that the life to come will be so beautiful and full that they *cannot wait*.

If someday I am afforded the opportunity to contemplate my own death, I can't say I know where I fall on this scale. But I do know, as Eliot's poem says in so many ways, that *as a person of faith, I live in two worlds*: heaven and earth, church and society, this life and the life to come. I don't fully fit in either, and that's okay. But I have enough joy in this life to want to keep going, while I still trust that what lies on the other side will be even richer.

So I am not sure I would have ended the poem the way Eliot did, but it is his poem, and he has given us a poem through which we can draw closer to God, come to a greater understanding of Jesus Christ, and led by the Spirit “grow wise in.”<sup>9</sup> For that I am thankful.

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Larkin, “Church Going,” published in *The Less Deceived* (1955), available at <https://hell.pl/agnus/anglistyka/Literatura/Philip%20Larkin%20-%20Church%20Going.pdf>.