

Sermon for January 7, 2024

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### The Treasure

Isaiah 60:1-6    Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14    Ephesians 3:1-12    Matthew 2:1-12

The poet, T.S. Eliot, in telling the Magi story, begins this way:

*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 of slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and gambling  
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.*

The whole poem is much longer and you might like to look it up and read the whole story. It's not a very romantic version of the *Journey of the Magi*, is it? It has no hint of three kings trying to smoke a rubber cigar and having it explode, blowing them onto a star. Rather, Eliot highlights from the start of the poem that this quest for the infant king will have its hardships. All journeys after truth and meaning will go down some unfamiliar roads, full of risk and not-knowing, our heads full of voices saying this is all folly. But the treasure to be found! Now that's what gets us started on such risky journeys in the first place! The treasure!

Only Matthew tells the Magi story, a tale that begins in the time of King Herod, in the age of tyrant kings. Now, Herod himself was half Judean, but he was a Gentile at heart. As well, he was a bloody-minded despot with his own security forces, as well as the Roman army to back him up in quelling protest movements. The world into which Jesus was born was violent and volatile, a world where birth and death weren't always easy to tell apart. That's what troubles the Magi of Eliot's poem. They ask each other if they came all this way for birth or for death? And yet they came.

The Magi came from Persia, which is modern-day Iran. They were part of the priestly class in Persia, serving the ruler. They had access to the centres of power across a wide region, which explains how these Magi had access to King Herod. To say they studied and followed the stars is to make them seem like romantics and dreamers, which they were not. Their lives were devoted to discerning, through their religion of Zoroastrianism, the rise and fall of kings. They followed this particular new star all the way to Jerusalem, Israel's centre of power. They've been going through the city asking a question that could be considered destabilizing. These Gentile, alien strangers are asking: where is he who was born King of the Judeans?

It's hugely embarrassing for King Herod to have strangers nosing around his kingdom asking where the King of the Judeans has been born. After all, he, Herod, is King of the Judeans.

Word gets around fast enough for Herod to think these strangers are bad news and to start looking over his shoulder. Herod has all the trappings of ancient kingship. He has ten wives and lots of quarrelsome sons and daughters. He's built many palaces to keep the family from killing each other. He has a magnificent temple on a mountain in Jerusalem; he has money; he has powerful friends. He views the Magi as a challenge to his honour and to his throne. Surely they should have come to him first, discreetly, on their knees even.

Yet they have effrontery to question Herod, to challenge him, as they talk about a star, of all things. "We have seen his star," they say, "and we know it means something important." Not so strange even in our day, this interest in stars and what they portend. Even today, huge numbers of people turn first to the horoscopes when they open their morning newspapers.

In Jesus' day Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of Persia. All over the Ancient Middle East, people put much stock in stars and their meanings. Stars could point to blessing but also to calamity. The Magi's interpretation is that a new king has been born. It remains to be seen if that is a blessing.

Herod listens to the Magi and tries to get as much information as he can from them. Shockingly, they speak not about "a" king but about "the" king. He calls for his cabinet, his own people, who are supposed to know about momentous events – another humiliation, really, to have to consult them at all. As King he should know everything. But he asks his own elite advisors, "Have you heard anything about a new king?"

His own people turn to the resources of their own religion, to the Hebrew Scriptures, and what they tell Herod is not reassuring in the least. They quote the prophet Micah: "the new king will be born in Bethlehem, in Judea." Bethlehem sounds like a little hick town, nothing to worry about. Still, it was the birthplace of Israel's greatest monarch, King David. The advisors can't think of a way to make Micah's prophecy sound to Herod like good news.

Herod leaves them and returns to the Magi. He seems to snap his fingers and issue a command as if they are mere servants: "Go and search for this king and when you find him, bring me word so I too may go and worship him." Can't you picture his cronies when he says that? Oh, sure, Boss. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. We'll go and worship him with you.

The Magi set out again on their quest, having heard the word, "Bethlehem" but still not knowing as much as they would like about where the star is guiding them. Some quests are like that, confusing and difficult. Even today, there are some questions that can't be answered by Google; some roads not in the GPS. And some quests take years. How do we prepare for such a journey?

When we set out on a quest for the ultimate treasure, the gift of God in Christ, we discover we must leave some things behind, things like power, certainty, status, and self-centredness, even traditions. We gather up our courage and determination and loyalty. And some days we may wonder if we're heading in the right direction. Like the Magi in Eliot's poem we are liable to hear "the voice in heads singing, saying this is all folly."

But the Magi have more than their wits and determination. They have that connection with the heavens, with the Holy One. They have the star. And Matthew writes, "the star stopped over the place where the child was." They know by the star in the heavens that they have come to the right place. "And they were overwhelmed with joy," says Matthew. Joy. The Magi are

overwhelmed with joy as they meet the Divine. Another of our poets, Ray Hobbs, expressed it this way: "They joined the echoes of choirs, the excited whispers of shepherds, the adoring murmur of the dumb animals at a birth." This quest for the child brings joy which shall be to all people.

Matthew writes, “the Magi enter the house.” Such a little sentence but so full of meaning. We know what it is to enter into something, to be fully engaged by an experience, to give oneself over completely to what treasure is found after such a long journey. The Magi bring their whole selves to this moment, this entering, when they see the child with Mary, his mother. And they know exactly what to do: they kneel down and worship. They didn’t do that for King Herod, but they kneel down and worship this infant. They offer the gift of themselves as well as their treasure chests. You can see they are utterly open to the Divine. They honour the child with what they treasure, what they value, what they hold dear. They receive the news of the treasure this infant will offer the world.

The story ends with a dream – not unusual in our Scriptures. Remember Joseph being told in a dream not to shame Mary but to take her as his wife? Herod is granted no dreams or visions. He’s informed only by hearsay and frightening Scripture and unreliable chief priests and scribes. But God warns the Magi in a dream not to travel home the way they came. Without a doubt, Herod’s spies will be searching for them. And so they leave for their own country by another road.

One way we might read this Gospel of Matthew as a counter-narrative. It exposes the world of the centre of power in Jerusalem under a brutal king; it unveils the alternative world of God’s reign as the gospel continues. This counter-narrative can guide us in the year ahead as we consider how best to continue MacNeill’s ministry. It invites us to watch for something utterly new to happen and not to be afraid to travel an unfamiliar road.

Like the Magi, we have dreams and visions to guide us, not our own dreams but those of prophets like Isaiah and Micah and the Psalmists and poets and hymn-writers. We have another year of grace to be guided by these dreams and possibilities.

We have treasure, too. We have the companionship of others at this table. And like the Magi we have heavenly signs: bread and cup, cross and candle. We have the promise that we will find Christ among us if we search, if we are open, if we put the treasure of the Christ above all other treasure. On this first Sunday in Epiphany is revealed to us the treasure hidden for ages, even Jesus Christ. Amen.