

Journey as the Magi

(Matthew 2:1-12)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
The Epiphany, January 6, 2019

In the name of the one God, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Amen.

*'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.'*¹

With these five lines, adapted from a 1622 Nativity sermon preached by the English bishop Lancelot Andrewes, the poet T. S. Eliot begins one of his most famous works, "Journey of the Magi." This poem, 43 lines of beautiful language and imagery laid out as a recollection of one of those who visited the infant Jesus, is often read on this Feast Day of The Epiphany.

Their journey had been a long and undoubtedly difficult one. As Eliot continues:

*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.'*²

For the Magi, the experience of this journey would have been much longer than the 12 days we commemorate each year between the Nativity and this morning's remembrance. Despite the popular images of three kings kneeling before the child in a dim Bethlehem stable, the truth of

¹ T. E. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi." Poetry Archive, <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/journey-magi>.

² Ibid.

the matter is that these visitors did not arrive in time to see Jesus at the manger. In fact, they did not even arrive within a few days of the birth of the child. It could have been as long as two years before they delivered their gifts to the child. By that time Jesus and Mary and Joseph, while still in Jerusalem, were as we hear in Matthew in a house.

And again, Eliot:

*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.³*

And we do not even know that there were three; nowhere in the Gospel is there a number attributed to the group of visitors. I have a guess that when John Henry Hopkins, the 19th century priest and writer of “We Three Kings,” set down the verses to that hymn he saw three gifts and assumed three kings. After that the rest is, of course, history.

What I would like to focus on this morning, however, is not how many folks showed up at Mary and Joseph’s front door, or how long it took them to complete their journey. Instead, I would like us to consider who God called to this incredible journey.

The Magi likely came from somewhere in Persia or Babylon. This group of individuals would have been well known to the people of Jesus’ day, largely because of the references to them – mostly negative – found in the writings of the prophets. In the Book of Daniel, for instance, they are portrayed “in a negative light as selfish, incompetent, and brutal pagans.”⁴ They were called “the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers.”⁵ Despite the tradition and references found to them in the Scriptures, however, the members of this culture – from among whom were called the visitors we remember today – were in truth “representatives of Eastern theology, philosophy, and natural science.”⁶ At that time, on this journey, they are “wise and pious Gentiles who from the beginning ... seek to worship the child Jesus.”⁷

³ Eliot.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 99.

⁵ Daniel 2:2 (NRSV).

⁶ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, p. 134.

⁷ Luz, p. 135.

Wise and pious ... **Gentiles**. Think about that for a moment. God could have called **anyone** from among the people of Israel to travel to Bethlehem. He could have called a priest from the Temple in Jerusalem to go, a distance of only about six miles. It could have been the rabbi from a local synagogue – even the one in Bethlehem – who was directed to make the journey across town. As we saw in other instances throughout the season of Advent, God could have sent an archangel to summon a wife or mother or sister (“a daughter of Eve,” in the words of C. S. Lewis from *The Chronicles of Narnia*), just as he had done when Elizabeth and then Mary were told they would in turn bear the last of the prophets and the one whose coming he foretold.

But he did not do **any** of that. Instead, God went outside the box ... and most certainly far beyond the comfort zone of the people of Israel. He turned his gaze away from Israel and towards the East to summon with a star ... **Gentiles**. He called those viewed as faithless to worship the incarnate God on whom the faith of Israel rested. The story revealed in Matthew’s Gospel “challenges his audience’s prejudice against outsiders to their faith.”⁸

It is a remarkable thing that non-believers were called by God to this journey. And the fact that they did it, the fact that they were willing to travel so far to worship this child of God and bestow gifts upon him, “reflects some recognition of his identity.”⁹ Because of their views on other aspects of reality in the world, they did not necessarily believe in Jesus. But they **knew** Jesus, and they knew what – and **who** – he represented.

So as we depart from here this morning, I would like to issue a new call to all who journey for God. First, in our world today, we should never discount the value of **anyone**. We may look at someone and see what they are saying or offering and wonder **Why?** ... all the while missing the point that **God** has chosen them and is saying to us **Why not?** And second, if these Magi – these **non**-believers – were willing to travel so far and experience so much to worship Jesus, how far are we as **believers** willing to go to do likewise? What risks will we be willing to take for Jesus on our own journeys from East, West, North and South?

And Eliot concludes:

*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,*

⁸ Keener, p. 100.

⁹ Keener, p. 105.

*With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*¹⁰

Amen.

¹⁰ Eliot.