

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 2:1-12
“Journey of the Magi”

During this season’s Christmas Cycle, Stephanie and I have integrated poetry into our sermons. Today is no exception. The sermon proclaims the good news by interpreting T. S. Eliot’s famous poem “Journey of the Magi.” The poem is based on the scripture just read which is the biblical text for Epiphany.

Eliot begins:

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year...”

The words sound like the weather of the eastern US. During a 45-minute telephone conversation with a friend in Denver last night, the temperature there dropped three degrees. It was below freezing at the beginning of the conversation. According to Eliot, the journey of the Magi takes place at the worst time of the year. They are traveling from the east to bring gifts to the Christ child. This winter it snowed in the Holy Land.

We have made the transition from Christmas to Epiphany, from the birth of Jesus to the visit of the wise men or kings or astrologers shortly after the birth.

John Westerhoff writes in his book, *A Pilgrim People*, that on Christmas we celebrate God’s coming to us. On Epiphany, we celebrate our going to God. He writes:

“One of the names given to this ‘supreme day,’ as the Middle Ages referred to it, is the Feast of the Three Kings. Of course they were not kings; nor were they men for sure, nor were there three for certain. Though tradition has given them the names Melchior, Casper, and Balthazar, we do not know whether they were black or white...From a critical perspective of the historian, there were no such three kings. The three kings live only in the eyes of our imaginations, and their poetic story is only for those who believe in the truth of dreams and the longings of the human heart.”

Reviewers of T. S. Eliot’s poem “Journey of the Magi” say that the poem is Eliot’s longing of the heart. It’s his conversion story. It’s a modern equivalent of the biblical story. It is our story. Think of his first stanza as your search for meaning or of our search for the Divine. It’s not an easy search. We are tempted to give up or turn back to the comforts of the familiar.

“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 when 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 dirty 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.”

Westerhoff writes that, “On Epiphany we celebrate the story of that blessed journey taken by all those who seek after God’s reign. The story we tell is the story of our human journey illumined by the poetry of three wise pilgrims, led by, of all things, a star, through deserts and hazardous unmapped wilds, just to catch a glimpse of a longed-for ruler of earth and heaven.”

He goes on to say that we are all pilgrims in search of fulfillment and health, holiness and wholeness, peace and justice, equity and freedom. These foolish wise folk...were looking for God’s kingdom, for the way to individual and corporate salvation in the world and in their hearts. And they found it by obeying the foolish wisdom of their imagination; by acting as if their dreams were a reality; by paying no attention to the way things really are, and by risking a journey in search of an impossible dream.

Eliot describes the difficulties of taking that journey. When we follow the promptings of our hearts, the spiritual longings within us, the call of the spirit in search of salvation for our world, and ourselves are we not tempted to give up and turn back? As in the passage described by Eliot, don’t we also have voices singing in our ears, saying that this is all folly? But we press on, as did the Magi in scripture and in Eliot’s poem.

The Bible doesn’t say what it was like to arrive in the region of Bethlehem. Eliot describes how he sees it.

“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 wineskins.
 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.”

For Eliot conversion comes with the dawn, the beating of darkness (the darkness in our lives), three trees on the low sky symbolizing the crosses of Calvary recalling Jesus’ death on behalf of humanity, old white horses galloping away which is the old dispensation departing, and then arriving and meeting the baby in Bethlehem, the Christ child.

For Eliot it is “satisfactory.” There’s no cataclysmic conversion, ringing of bells, or great vision of light. It’s a surprising, still, ordinary encounter with the Divine. Doesn’t this relate with many of our experiences of the Divine whether on a hill, in a room, in a church, or with a friend? They are “satisfactory” and yet, something very powerful happens: the Spirit takes hold of our lives and we are never the same. Eliot describes this well in his final stanza.

“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.”

Week after week we return to church, our Bible studies, our community gatherings, our mission involvements, our struggling and striving to be God’s people in the world, and there’s a sense that these too are “satisfactory,” and yet they are profound.

There is power in the seeming “satisfactory,” in any endeavor where God is expressly a part of our lives, our decisions, and our communions. These are the

things that provide the vitality of life that conversion bring: that enable us to die to all that oppresses us, to clear ourselves of alien gods, and enable us to be about God's good work of peace and loving justice in the world.

I wouldn't recommend you see the movie, "The Wolf of Wall Street," now on the screens. But if you like to watch possible Oscar-nomination movies as I do you might want to see it. As a movie, it is excellent. In watching it, you will understand Eliot's words: "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,/But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,/With an alien people clutching their gods..."

Westerhoff writes that the feast of Epiphany invites us to listen to the voice of God and step forth on a spiritual pilgrimage; to enter a new secular year forgetting all that lies behind and ignoring all that seems reasonable today; to trust the possibility of God's dream and go forth carrying with us the gold of love, the incense of longing, and the myrrh of suffering.

Epiphany invites us to live as the mad *Man of La Mancha* who dreamed the impossible dream and strove with the last ounce of courage, to reach the unreachable star.

Epiphany invites us to continue our journey to the Christ, to believe in the dawning of new days, to know we can die to all that oppresses us and drags us down, and to affirm our beautiful, wonderful and worthwhile lives in Christ.
Amen.