



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas 2

Where Is the Child?

[RCL] Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23 or Luke 2:41-52 or Matthew 2:1-12

The only goal for the Magi who followed the star to Bethlehem was to find and worship the Christ with all their souls, bodies, and worldly goods. The trek of the wise men as a spiritual journey is captured well by T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi":

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.

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 arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may 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.

Weaving images from the gospel reading with Eliot's poem serves as a guide for own journeys. T.S. Eliot wrote "The Journey of the Magi" in 1927. That same year, Eliot the intellectual who had vigorously studied Buddhist and Hindu philosophy at Harvard University, came to saving faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized. This poem chronicles Eliot's own journey to conversion.

In 1927, T.S. Eliot was also working on a book on the Anglican preacher Lancelot Andrewes and had recently completed an English translation of St. John Perse's poem "Anabase." Eliot freely borrows from both a sermon by Andrewes and the French poem "Anabase" in crafting "The Journey of the Magi." The first five lines of the poem are lifted, with slight poetic alterations, from Lancelot Andrewes' Nativity sermon, preached for King James on Christmas Day 1622. Andrewes used as his text for the sermon Matthew 2:1-2, the first two verses of today's gospel. In that sermon, Andrewes said the Magi readily undertook "a wearisome, irksome, troublesome, dangerous, unseasonable journey" to follow the star to the Christ child. Then looking out on the royal court that formed his congregation, Andrewes said that people of his own day were so complacent in their faith that they would not likely travel to the manger if they were as close by as the shepherds, much less as far away as the Magi.

Andrewes went on to speak of his mid-seventeenth-century fellows, saying that they make great haste to other things, but not to worship God. If Christmas were to involve a long journey begun in December,

Andrewes said, “Best get us a new Christmas in September; we are not like to come to Christ at this feast.” For Andrewes the travel, the journey, the seeking, amounted to nothing in themselves. The only motivation of the Magi was to find and worship the Christ with all their souls, their bodies, and their worldly goods. Andrewes said our goal should be the same.

This sermon of 1622 apparently had quite an impact on the scholar and poet Eliot, who read it more than 300 years later as he was nearing a critical point of decision. Eliot was letting loose of his preconceived notions of who God is and how God acts and coming to see that the goal of his own life could be to seek and worship God.

The word “satisfactory,” which ends the second stanza of “The Journey of the Magi,” brings to mind today the idea of something barely up to snuff or “just good enough.” However, for Eliot, the word more likely rang of the Church of England’s 39 Articles of Religion, which describe Jesus’ death on the cross as the “satisfaction” of our sins. Jesus’ death was “satisfactory” in that it satisfied any payment we were to make to God for our sins. So far from being just good enough, “finding the place,” meant satisfaction for sins.

In the first of the poem’s three stanzas, the imagery tells of the perils of the voyage. Undertaking their journey in “just the worst time of the year,” the Magi push the sore-footed camels along only to find themselves lying down in melting snow and thinking of their summer palaces as sleep escapes them. Excuses were ample for turning back, yet the Magi redouble their efforts, traveling through the night, napping briefly, and moving on.

This part of the poem shows how a spiritual seeker encounters many obstacles to a true journey of faith. The way is not easy, and all along there are inducements to give up the trip altogether. Faith will not come easily, and reaching conversion happens when we are willing to let those voices that proclaim it all to be folly to recede to the background as we press onward.

Enlightenment and conversion come in the second section of the poem. The section opens at dawn. Leaving behind the cold, we are brought into a place flowing with living water, which beats back the darkness. At evening, the close of this conversion experience, the Magi find the place, and in it, satisfaction.

In the third section we discover that all that preceded it happened long before. The birth the wise men went to see turned into something like death, their own death. The conversion experience was a death to their old life and they are no longer at ease among the old ways of being. The once familiar ways of home are now, for the Magi, an alien people clutching their gods. The wise man now gladly looks to another death, or rebirth.

Like the Magi, Eliot recognizes that his own conversion experience was not a one-time event. Other conversions would need to take place. More than one conversion is needed if we are ready to worship God

with our souls, our bodies, and our worldly goods, as Lancelot Andrewes said we should. We can find ourselves converted in soul, but still following the old ways with our bodies or with our possessions. A new change will take another sort of conversion. Not a repeating of the initial conversion experience, but a journey to a deeper knowledge of God.

The end of the poem is a new beginning. The traveler back home once again wants to seek more. He should be glad of another death, which is itself new birth. The faith journey continues. One key to where all of this leads us is Eliot's enigmatic line from the third stanza, "but set down, This set down." Eliot is quoted here again from Lancelot Andrewes' Nativity sermon, which provided the first five lines of the poem. Andrewes said, "Set down this; that to find where He is, we must learn to ask where He is, which we full little set ourselves to do."

Andrewes went on to say that there is a place to find Christ and it is not just anywhere. For Andrewes points out that Jesus said some will come and deceive you, saying of the Messiah, "Here he is," and "There he is." We must do what the wise men did that Herod did not do, we must seek. If like Herod we sit still, we will never find the Christ.

Our gospel reading today said that the wise men asked Herod, "Where is the child ... for we observed his star ... and have come to pay him homage." They were seekers with a clear purpose. To take your own spiritual journey to another level, seek God in the places where he is found, through scripture, prayer, and worship. The journey is a long, the ways deep, and the weather hard, but in the end you will find it was, you may say, satisfactory.

*This sermon was written by **the Rt. Rev. Frank Logue**, now-bishop of Georgia, for 2 Christmas in 2011.*