

Epiphany, Jan. 3, 2020
 New Song Episcopal Church
 By Dorothy Whiston

Isaiah 60:1-6
 Ephesians 3:1-12
 Matthew 2:1-12

Finding Our Way in the Dark

The second Sunday after Christmas is often a preacher's choice Sunday in terms of the Gospel reading and thus the theme of the service. Given that we just had a grand conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, which many likened to the Star of Bethlehem -- and which actually was visible more than once near the time of Jesus' birth -- I decided to follow the star and invite us to celebrate Epiphany this morning.

There is of course no historical evidence that there were any visitors from the East at Jesus's birth, nor that Herod had baby boys slaughtered around Bethlehem soon thereafter; both described by Matthew. The nativity stories are just that -- stories. Stories that refer back to ancient traditions and point the way forward. Stories that are meant to reveal God's truth and grace incarnate in Jesus bringing the living God right into our very humanity. Which, when you stop to ponder it, is truly mind boggling and can use a little narrative elaboration!

Matthew's birth story is not nearly so sweet as Luke's. There are no beautiful, hopeful songs like those of Mary and Zechariah. Rather Matthew weaves dreams throughout his story, and those dreams all address pretty troubling situations. Matthew himself lived during troubled times. He likely wrote his nativity story for Christian Jews fairly soon after the destruction of the second temple and the sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, ending years of Jewish revolt. Matthew definitely wants us to see not only the radiant glory of God, but also to pay attention to the darkness of the world that Christ was born into. And continues to dwell in today.

So right there in the dark is where I'm going to start today -- by way of T.S. Eliot's provocative poem "Journey of the Magi." It begins:

"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."

Eliot continues in the voice of one of the magi, describing the many hardships of the journey and their longing for what they left behind, recounting their self-doubt. Eventually the magi arrive at the place of the birth; the narrator only remarking that they:

[And] "arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
 Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

And then the speaker 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,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.

Eliot wrote this stark poem not long after his conversion to the Anglican faith, and in fact, begins it by quoting a 17th century sermon by an Anglican bishop. And a fairly bleak, wintry quote it is. And here we all are today, in the cold of winter, in a bleak year, on a journey that for many of us, and millions around the world, continues to be unfamiliar, long and arduous. The ways deep and weather sharp, indeed!

I would like to suggest, given our unsettled and unsettling circumstances, that along with the magi and T.S. Eliot, we also might be ripe for a pilgrimage journey of conversion. Conversion of course means more than just adopting a new faith tradition. In the broader, more spiritual sense, it's about changing one's heart and one's life. Or, really, allowing one's very personhood and relationships with everyone and everything, to be transformed by God. From the inside out and the outside in, over and over again, more or less noticeable, throughout our lives.

Many interpreters suggest Eliot's poem, and perhaps to some extent even Matthew's story, is about this inner pilgrimage of conversion. Like Matthew, Eliot doesn't describe divine birthing in particularly endearing ways. Being born again in the Spirit sounds so heavenly. But Eliot tells us: "this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

Truly, the Christian call to conversion – to take up the cross and die to self -- is more than a little off-putting. But then, I remember that I didn't much enjoy giving birth to our two kids either. It was only knowing where the pain was leading that kept me keep going. The promise of new life about to crown impelled me to stay focused and take the next breath, and the next, even when I felt like I couldn't go on.

While I don't think God ever compels us to do anything, which would deny the freedom essential to love, I do believe God entices us to submit to our transformation, and stays with us through the suffering we encounter, even when that's not readily apparent. I think Matthew got it so right in having a far-off star steadfastly lead the magi to the Christ child. No fireworks,

just a steady Light shining forth through the darkness, which I'm sure was sometimes hidden in clouds.

The steadfastness of God's Light didn't mean the journey to Bethlehem wasn't arduous, or that the way home would be straightforward. Life is full of hardships and confusion and detours. But God is faithful. And paradoxically closer to us than we are to ourselves, even while transcending all that we are. I love that God sent an angel to the magi in a dream to tell them simply to bypass Herod on the way home. Listening to God instead of the cacophony of the world will very often save us a lot of trouble.

Richard Rohr's recent writings have been about the dialectic of order, disorder, and reordering that is essential to making our way along the spiritual journey. This is a process that happens in the world as well as in our interiors.

I think you could say that 2020, even this period in American and world history, is an era of disorder. Things are so uncertain that most everyone is disoriented in one way or another, and so often grabbing on to old ways ever more tightly. Nothing seems very stable nor feels very comfortable and it's tempting to blame others for the chaos. And even to want to make them pay for it.

While I can certainly resonate with all the tables turned in Mary's song, and so often in the words of the prophets, it seems to me that's not really how Christ operates in the world. Though Jesus perhaps once literally turned tables over to prevent religious figures from selling access to God, there is no indication in the gospels that he ever wanted anyone to suffer diminishment or payback. That, sadly, is the all-too-human way of doing things—a way that gets us exactly nowhere.

So, as followers of Jesus, let us always remember to look to God's star shining in the darkness, even when some nights are completely overcast and foggy. Let us continue to trust that if we stay the course as best we can discern it -- which largely means doing our own inner work -- God will lead us into the birthing of a new, more life-giving order.

I truly believe that Christ, maybe now more than ever, is calling us to a "third way" that, as Gandhi said, embodies the change we desire to see in the world. Change that is rooted in and a flowering forth of God's Love. A truly beautiful, vital epiphany just like Isaiah pointed to in today's reading when he says: You will see and be radiant.

After spending so much time in the dark this morning, I'd like to close with another poem that conveys a more radiant dimension of God's epiphany all around us, if we just have eyes to see. Here is the poem, "Mindful", by Mary Oliver.

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Everyday
I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.

It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world —
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.

Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant —
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these —
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

Thanks be to God, and Epiphany blessings to all!

Journey of the Magi – T.S. Eliot

“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 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
 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,
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