

A Cold Coming

December 24, 2020 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Matthew 2: 1-12

*A homily preached by Rev. Daniel A. Smith
On December 24, 2020 - Christmas Eve*

Reading -- Matthew 2: 1-12

Throughout Advent, we've been asking the question who will show us the way to Christmas. By introducing the new banners behind me, one by one, we've shared the stories of Mary, Elizabeth, Gabriel and more. Tonight, the rest of the characters take their places in this divine drama, with banners to boot. And yet missing from our tableaux are the very last to arrive, that mysterious entourage from the East, the Magi!

Matthew's Gospel is the only one that features them. We just heard it all. Yet notice what we didn't hear. There's no mention of the number three. No mention of them being kings. No names either. No Caspar, Melchior or Balthazar. That tradition didn't take until the 8th century. And they certainly aren't the "Three Wise Men" a good bartender would know as a stiff drink - equal parts Jim Beam, Johnnie Walker and Jack Daniels. But the text does say they were wise, and it implies that they had the farthest to travel to get the place where it all began. I can't help but wonder if this year our Christmas story somehow feels more distant for us too.

As some of you know, one of my favorite poems is T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi." Do yourselves a favor in the coming days. Google an audio recording and listen to the whole thing through. You can find one of Eliot himself reading it but there's a better one, I think, from a 1992 recording by Bruce Cockburn, Roseanne Cash and Lou Reed. It starts with Cockburn's guitar gently picking out the tune to We Three Kings. Cash's voices next layers on softly sung choruses - O Star of Wonder, Star of Night, guide us to that perfect light -- and then, Lou Reed's inimitable voice shares the spoken words:

*"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."*

Let's pause right there! Already we can relate, right? This pandemic! All the God-awful and deadly political chaos and turmoil we've been slogging through! This seemingly endless year! Star of wonder, maybe, but until lately it's been more like a star of wondering how much worse things can get. Eliot's wise ones are right there with us for a time. Their downright grumpy, and at Christmas no less. What gives?

The poem continues:

*And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow...
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling.*

He goes on to complain of hostile cities and unfriendly towns, traveling through the night, the lack of shelter and sleep. Again, some of us know the feeling all too well.

*Then at dawn, [Eliot writes] 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 we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
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.*

Well, at least he's honest. After that wearisome journey, "satisfactory" may have been all their exhaustion allowed them to feel. Yet here again, I wonder, can we relate? After the year we've had -- being apart, many homes alone tonight, a virtual candle-lighting -- satisfactory might be the best we can do too! And we aren't even talking about reigns of terror, whether of Herod or our current empire. And yet, here, right here in that recognition of simple unsentimental satisfaction, a profound wisdom breaks forth in the last stanza of the poem.

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have 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.*

Before I lose you all in thinking that this is the grinchiest Christmas Eve homily ever, bear with me just a little more. Tonight, we celebrate not only that God's love and light shines, but that it shines in the darkness, on the long and bitter journeys, in places where people can't sleep or find shelter, during violent empires. Tonight, we celebrate not only that God's love and light bursts forth, but that it does so into the midst of human loneliness and grief, in the wake of 320,000 U.S. Covid deaths. Surely, none of us will be glad of even one more human death, but that's not what Eliot's wise one is telling us here.

I think what he's saying is that in order to witness and comprehend this birth, something in us needs to die. Something in our old ways and dispensations, something in our clutching to pain and death denying illusions, something in our old kingdoms needs to die and this too, hard and bitter as it may feel, is part of the good news for us and for all the world! And what a profound chance we have this year to take this

wisdom into our hearts and homes! You're already there! Friends, stay put as we must, this season, our journey right now is not one of travel, but of transformation, and what a long journey it has been these last nine months! And with the wise ones, we too know we can't go back to our pre-pandemic normal. Our old dispensations of individualism, white supremacy, capitalism, consumerism and carbon addiction have defined our American Kingdom for too long! Those who continue to clutch those gods seem increasingly alien to us. More and more, we, hopefully all of us at some level, are learning we can no longer be at ease here in this empire! And this learning, this gift of Christmas wisdom, is good news!

All season long, we've been looking for guides to show us the way! As if this is where it ends, as if the manger is the destination! In fact, it's not only the place where it all began, it's the place where it all begins for us! This is where the new kingdom - the kingdom of God - draws near! It's our turning point to another way! Did you hear it? "And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way." Christmas isn't the end! Christmas is the starting point for another way - another way to travel boundlessly, another way to live, fearlessly, another way to love, joyfully. Tonight, we have a chance to see, even through the screens before you, a window into a deeper reality, to see that perfect light of Christ that fully reveals God's love and lights up another way of being in this world.

Allow me to close with a different more hopeful poem that I excerpt from a wise one of our time Maya Angelou. Though I don't think she had Christmas in mind, like the magi, she brings it from the stars right down to earth and to our own role in this story! It's called:

A Brave And Startling Truth

*We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn
A brave and startling truth
And when we come to it
To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers
From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms*

*We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
Whose hands can strike with such abandon
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines*

When we come to it

*We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear*

*When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.*

A cold coming, we have had of it! Yet when we come to it, as we do this night, when we come to it...Wow! A brave and starting truth! A place of possibility and wonder and peacemaking release! A place of new birth! A start pointing for another way! Can we carry this wisdom and hope and love into a new year together?

When we come to it, we know that too are not alone for God is with us. When we come to it, we know that we too can carry the very wonder of God in our human flesh, we too can be the hands of healing tenderness, we know too can be bearers of that light. When we come to it, we too can play our parts in this divine human pageant of love. Thanks be to God, born in Christ this very night! Amen!



