Feast of the Epiphany

Matthew 2

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 1-5-25

Although T.S. Eliot is best known as a poet and not as a theologian, there is no Biblical scholar who, in my opinion, captures the deepest meaning and truth of our Gospel text for this morning more profoundly than does T.S. Eliot in his poem "Journey of the Magi."

Writing from the perspective of one of the magi many years after his journey to Bethlehem with his star-watching companions, the poem is an imaginative reminiscence of the difficult journey, the arrival at the house where Jesus was, and the aftermath of that experience… The one Magi's long look back on the whole event and on his life subsequent to it, ending this way…

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.

When we read Jesus' birth narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, with its focus on the journey of the wisemen by the light of the star, we traditionally imagine a bright and beautiful scene… the wisemen kneeling down in the presence of Jesus with their gifts, overjoyed for the wonder of it all…

But upon closer reading, we see that Matthew puts it this way… *"When the wisemen had heard King Herod, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy… And then, on entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage…"*

Upon careful reading, we see that the joy of the wisemen came when the star stopped and they knew they had finally come to the end of their arduous journey… There is no mention of "joy" when finally they saw the child, or when they knelt down to pay him homage and to present their gifts… There is only the additional information that they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but rather to leave for their own country by a different road…

Which is not to say that the Wisemen didn't know joy in the presence of Jesus… But only to recognize that the whole strange experience must have also undermined and shaken their expectations and plans in any number of ways;

- not only through the dream compelling them to avoid Herod by taking a different route home…
- but also by undermining any notion the Magi may have had about the kind of "king" they were going to find when they finally reached their destination….

That “king” turning out to be born not in a palace with worldly power of any kind, but in the backwater town of Bethlehem to two no-count backwater parents…

- Turning every normal understanding of kings and power on its head,
- dashing their hopes perhaps of their difficult journey ending in any worldly kind of “glory,”
- and affirming what one theologian has said about coming to know the truth revealed in the person of Jesus when he wrote, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free, but before it makes you free it will make you miserable.”

This is not a statement we are accustomed to hearing; certainly it’s not a statement we associate with the birth narrative from Matthew’s Gospel with its bright star and its Wisemen three…

But T.S. Eliot’s Wiseman alluded to it when he said that the birth they witnessed in Jesus was a hard a bitter agony for them… like death… sending them home by a different way, and making them ill at ease with their old lives and their “old dispensation” amongst their old neighbors who, in light of the Wisemen’s experience in Bethlehem, seemed suddenly to be “alien people clutching their gods.”

All of that change in their “normal” lives no doubt causing a misery of sorts, as the death of old expectations and beliefs and understandings always does… but leading the wiseman in T.S. Eliot’s poem to say years after the journey was over that he would do it again, and that he would be glad for another death like the one he had known at the birth of Jesus…

Which in the end, must have broken open his eyes and heart to something more beautiful and true and life-giving than anything he had ever before known or imagined… Even as his old life lay in pieces all around him…

If Matthew could have, I have no doubt that he would have created a little link to T.S. Eliot's poem at the end of the second chapter of his Gospel, not only as a way of helping his readers imagine what the experience might have been like for the Wisemen…

But also because it was Matthew's intention in writing the birth narrative the way he did, to help his own early Jewish Christian community in the last decades of the first century to experience the same kind of death as they pondered the story of Jesus' birth…

A death that would challenge their own old dispensations… particularly as those dispensations led to their limited understanding of God's grace and presence, assuming as they did, that inclusion into God's loving reach was restricted to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob… those who had received the blessing of God in the first place…

Yes, as they knew, it was a blessing intended to be extended to the whole world in time, but… not yet… not yet for those who couldn't yet fully understand what covenantal relationship with God really meant… not yet for those who weren't yet dedicated enough to keep the law at the heart of their daily living or to adapt to the expectations of Jewish tradition…

Meaning that for many in Matthew's predominantly Jewish community of Jesus followers, the idea that God's blessing and presence could include Gentiles would have been unthinkable…

scandalous… an attack on their entire belief system… utterly maddening…

So you might imagine what misery Matthew's birth narrative would have caused many in his community as the story made clear that the **first** people to see the truth about the long-awaited Messiah… the **first** people to recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of the promise foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures, weren't even Jews, but Gentiles…

(Not to mention the consternation Jesus' humble birth far from the halls of power must have caused those who expected a Messiah who would come bearing God's might and power to overthrow Roman rule and restore Isreal to its former glory as in the days of King David)…

What misery Jesus' birth narrative in Matthew's Gospel must have caused to many in his community of faith… What death to long-held assumptions and expectations…

And yet, as well, what (*gasp!)* unimaginable possibilities it must have opened for those who could see what Matthew was hoping they would see…

The devastating and beautiful truth of which I can best understand by remembering again a telling of the Christmas story I experienced some 37 years ago at St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Ellsworth, before I became a pastor, as the congregation began planning the annual Christmas pageant, something I'd been in charge of for a number of years…

And for good reason… I was Biblically literate, classically trained in both voice and violin, theatrically gifted, Lutheran to the core… I knew the most appropriate hymns to choose, the authentic kinds of clothing

to align with 1st century Palestine, and I could write a script rich in theological meaning and true to the story…

So you can imagine my surprise when the pastor of the church said he thought someone else should be in charge of the pageant for a change… Someone rather new to the congregation who had come from Houlton, Maine, with no former ties to the Lutheran tradition… Someone who had none of the musical, theological and theatrical background that I did… Someone who sang not with fine choral groups but with a band that played in bars and at parties… Someone who had told the pastor of her interest in directing the pageant that year without any regard for who had previously been director…

Someone to whom the pastor (in his irritating wisdom) gave the responsibility of directing the pageant that year… She, who enlisted many people in the congregation, including all the teenagers and younger children, including my own three kid, but forbade me from taking any part in the writing, the directing or the rehearsing of the pageant because, as she said, she wanted it to be a "wonderful surprise"…

And a surprise it was, with up-beat contemporary music sung gladly by that group of traditional Lutherans, and enthusiastic teenagers taking parts in the story I was never able to get them to take, with the part of Mary played by the most challenging teenager of all, and the three wisemen be-bopping down the aisle toward the holy family wearing leather jackets and sunglasses, and the whole congregation letting loose in ways they had never let loose before…

And as if that wasn't enough, at the very end of the pageant, where everyone knows you're supposed to sing "Joy to the World" or "Go Tell it on the Mountain," the woman from Houlton, Maine had my little four-year old son Willie, with his shepherd costume on, complete with the headdress that was all crooked on his head… she had him step

forward, and in front of everyone, in his four-year-old little voice sing a song made famous by Kermit the Frog on the Muppet's Christmas album…

A song that goes like this…

It's in every one of us to be wise,

Find your heart,

Open up both your eyes.

We can all know everything

Without ever knowing why.

It's in everyone of us,

By and by.

And it killed me… It brought me such misery because in the excruciating beauty of it all I knew I could no longer be at ease in my old dispensation… My old dispensation in which God was somehow limited to things Lutheran, things "Christian," things classically rooted, things "theologically sound," things that aligned with my team, my values, my small miserly image of God… And I knew I would have to go home by a different way…

It was a misery for me as I watched the story of Jesus' birth unfold before me in the crazy telling of it at the hands of the woman from Houlton, Maine… Causing me to wonder if I was led all that way by birth or death, having thought forever so long that they were different…

But realizing then, in part (and even more so in the remembering of it over the years), that the story of Jesus' birth intends for its readers

(including us), both a death and a birth… A death to the things that hold us in bondage to our small miserly ways of seeing God and others… and a birth into a way of life made manifest in Jesus…

A life rooted in love, shaped by compassion, committed to justice, and intended for joy… Intended for joy in the deep deep knowledge of Emmanuel God with us through it all… as close to us as the air we breathe… longing always for us to see, to know the truth of the love that has the power to set us free…

May it be so for each us this day, dear brothers and sister in Christ… As we arrive on the eve of the Epiphany with the Wisemen at the manger bed and see before us the fulness of God made manifest in Jesus…

May the strange story of a God so crazy with love bring us the misery of leaving our old dispensations behind, and with the light of Christ to guide us, may it give us the courage and the joy, even as the Herods of the world tempts us to do otherwise, to go home by a different way… Amen.