

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole  
The Feast of the Epiphany, Morning Eucharist (C)  
Sunday, January 6, 2019

*Isaiah 60:1-6 | Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14*  
*Ephesians 3:1-12 | Matthew 2:1-12*

As I was thinking about following stars, the first puritans to come here in the 1620's and 30's came into my mind. Can we begin to imagine what it must have been like for John Winthrop and others like him, to leave their homes in gentle Suffolk and the other shires of England, and to make that long, long voyage across the ocean to these then unknown shores? Perhaps the only way we can get a modern sense of the enormity of this prospect is to imagine that we were the first astronauts like Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, getting ready to cross the millions of miles and awful emptiness of space to go to the moon. That is the kind of prospect that it must have been for them, just such a quest, such a journey, such a physical expression of hope and yearning for a new life and a better way.

Small wonder then, that they saw, in this venture, parallels in their situation with the people of Israel setting off on the 40 year-long journey through the wilderness in search of God's promised land.

For people to risk so much and to travel so far, they had to have a vision of what might be – so bright, that it was worth risking everything to reach out for. Long before the Statue of Liberty raised her torch to the world, they saw in their minds and hearts the light of a new life and a new hope, a shimmering city, yet unbuilt, set on a far distant hill.

And, in this, they, the first men of the moon, and the people of Israel, all show to us a reflection of an aspect of ourselves, and our human race, that goes close to the heart of what we are. We are a race that searches for and follows stars. Stars of hope for a better future and a better way.

You and I may not have taken such dramatic steps in our own lives as they did but I suspect most of us have taken some such steps. Moving to a new place, going to great lengths to win the heart of someone who is the love of our life, spending our last dime on a ticket to search for a new job or to study for a new career, or, the search for meaning in life and for God that has led us on journeys to places like Christ Church. The road from not knowing God to knowing him can seem just as great a journey to make when we begin.

So it is that today, as we think of the Magi, the wise men or the kings, and their quest, we recognize in their journey something extraordinary and yet very familiar. Now the story in this morning's Gospel is sometimes dismissed as a lovely, colorful invention but, actually this is exactly the kind of thing that could happen in the ancient world. There was in the world, at that time, a strange feeling of expectation of the coming of a king. Not just in Judaism but everywhere. Even the Roman historians knew about this. Not so very much later, the Roman Historian Suetonius could write in his Life of Vespasian "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world".<sup>1</sup> Another great Roman historian, Tacitus, in his Histories tells of the

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<sup>1</sup> Suetonius: Life of Vespasian, 4:5

same belief that "there was a firm persuasion ... that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire universal empire".<sup>2</sup>

The Magi were a learned cast of counselors and priests who came to be teachers and instructors of the Persian Kings. They, like everyone of their day, watched for signs in the heavens that might point to great changes here on the earth. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca also tells us that, at this same time, Magi had travelled all the way to Athens to sacrifice to the memory of Plato.<sup>3</sup> So they were mystics and prone to journey far to honor those they saw as key figures in their time. What is described could easily have happened.

The American poet, T.S. Eliot gives us a raw and earthy account of how he imagined these magi might have experienced their long pilgrimage, in his 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.  
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.

A hard time. Yes – all these journeys following bright stars involve struggle and hardship. The puritans, the people of Israel and any of us who have set off to follow the bright vision of what might be, what could be, have faced grim realities. The first colonists here barely survived the first winter, and which of us has not faced struggle and pain and hardship in the pursuit of our own lives' bright and shining hopes?

In the end the Magi find the stable and present their gifts, Gold for a king, Frankincense for a priest and Myrrh for one who is come to die. Eliot portrays the revelation at their journey's end as ambiguous.

And arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

Satisfactory. Is this a majestic understatement? Simply the inability to express just what it was that they found there, or is it somehow disappointing, not all that they had hoped for? In the end, in the poem, it is both.

When we reach our shining goals in life and faith, isn't this so true of our quests and journeys also? Marriage to the love of our life transpires to be hard and costly as well as wonderful. The scroll of

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<sup>2</sup> Tacitus: Histories, 5:13

<sup>3</sup> Seneca: Epistles, 58: 31

parchment at the graduation ceremony lies loosely in our hand as we look around the academic mountain top and, even in the glow of our success, we find it quite ordinary really. Even our closest moments with God, our greatest gifts of grace and insight, once they are over, still leave us standing at the bottom of Mount Tabor with the disciples after the Transfiguration looking at the epileptic foaming at the mouth and thrashing about uncontrollably in the dirt. All our epiphanies leave us changed but they do not provide us with any perfect answers or happy ever afters.

Yet even if the star sits, in the end, above only a grubby stable, the revelation still sweeps over us and undoes us and, like the first men on the moon, opens our eyes to a horizon we have never seen or known before. Eliot must be right that the Magi, even if they did not find what they expected, even if they were left perhaps with more questions than answers in the end, were changed forever by this birth that is somehow also like a 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.

The Epiphany is where Christ is revealed or manifested to the gentiles. It is also the story of all our encounters with the living God, and our own following of our life's stars. They change us and make us foreigners in the places we were so at home in before. But once we have seen the new truth, we can never be happy with the old half truth again. Like the pilgrims, suffer as we might, we can never give up the freedom we have found and return to the restrictions of the English shires.

This Epiphany, I am conscious that all of you have followed Christ's star and, one way and another it has led you here. Maybe recently, maybe many years ago. Maybe the revelation of Christ is fresh in your souls, maybe the deciding moments of your life's quest were long ago, and like the Magi, you are still learning to live in a new way in an old place. For all of us, though, there is no regret for having risked everything and left the old world for the new one Christ has shown us. The moment we found the stable and saw the Holy Child, is still fresh to us, even if it was a long time ago. And we know, that other epiphanies are never far away. As we come to the close of this Bicentennial Year we turn our eyes to the wider horizon and to the next stage in our journey as a congregation as well as individuals. The shining city on the hill that we saw from so far away still lies ahead. We are not there yet. But we have crossed the ocean and we see it more clearly than ever now.

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.