

## No Longer at Ease

Matthew 2:1-15

January 8, 2023

"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."

Those words open T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi." Later, the poet described how the poem took shape that Epiphany Sunday 1927, writing, "I had been thinking about it in church, and when I got home, I opened a half-bottle of Booth's gin, poured myself a drink, and began to write. By lunchtime the poem, and the half-bottle, were both finished."

Eliot's poetic interpretation of this morning's text from Matthew's Gospel is written in the voice of one of those three magi many decades after the arduous journey to Bethlehem. The final stanza is a moving reflection on the impact of that visit, which seemed to the magi to encompass both a beginning and an ending. For something profound had happened, happened to them, something that changed these seekers permanently. And yet, all those years later, the narrator still struggles to describe it.

"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."

Maybe you can relate this Epiphany Sunday. Throughout the season of Advent, we too traveled the road to Bethlehem. We recalled this ancient story and welcomed those sturdy gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. And then on Christmas day, we celebrated

the birth of Jesus—the word become flesh to live among us, the light shining in the shadows of the world, the perfect picture of God's love born to make us new. And those seasons have come and gone, and here we are, gathered again in worship, perhaps wondering how we might carry the warmth and the light of Christmas into a new year characterized by all the same struggles and sadness that we left behind in 2022. Here we are—the very dead of winter.

Let me suggest that the journey of the magi, and the heartbreakingly honest account of Matthew's Gospel, offer us wisdom for living these days. Like those ancient travelers, we have returned to our places—literally and figuratively—our routines and our schedules, our frustrations and our failures. We are faced with the annual reality that the comfort and joy of Christmas recede with the passage of time. Some years so quickly it takes our breath away. I can promise you this: comfort and joy were distant memories by the time the school bus arrived in front of our home on Thursday morning.

Matthew will not let us forget that this was true from the beginning of the story. That before he was hailed as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, before he was resurrected on Easter morning, before he ascended into heaven with power, Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph, was a refugee in the land of Egypt. Like his ancestor Moses, Jesus was born on the most wanted list of a powerful and insecure ruler. Like so many in our time, the family of Jesus, forced to escape the violence of their homeland in search of safety.

At the end of the story, after the angels and the shepherds, after the wise men and the baby, we hear the screams of mothers, weeping for their children lost to the command of a cruel king. Death,

pain, and sorrow before we can even get out of Bethlehem. Comfort and joy all but forgotten. The very dead of winter.

The poet W.H. Auden also wrote an honest Christmas poem, which he titled, "For the Time Being." At its close, Auden powerfully captures the post-Christmas mood that many of us experience, writing:

"Well, so that is that.  
 Now we must dismantle the tree,  
 Putting the decorations back  
     into their cardboard boxes –  
 Some have got broken –  
     and carrying them up to the attic.  
 The holly and the mistletoe  
     must be taken down and burnt,  
 And the children got ready for school.  
 There are enough  
 Left-overs to do, warmed-up,  
     for the rest of the week –  
 Not that we have much appetite,  
     having drunk such a lot,  
 Stayed up so late, attempted –  
     quite unsuccessfully –  
 To love all of our relatives, and in general  
 Grossly overestimated our powers.  
 Once again,  
 As in previous years  
     we have seen the actual Vision and failed  
 To do more than entertain it as an agreeable  
 Possibility, once again we have sent Him away."

A confession: I am haunted every year by Auden's words when it's back to the "real world," the one we left behind, if we were lucky, for a few carefree days. Once again, we have sent Christmas away, packed up in cardboard boxes and stored in the attic until December.

The magi return to the old dispensation. To their kingdoms. Their routines and their schedules. Their frustrations and their failures. And yet, *something is different*. There is something about that Vision, about that visit, that will not let them...will not let *us* go. No longer at ease, those Magi. Auden describes it this way: "To those who have seen the child, however dimly, however incredulously, the time being is, in a

sense, the most trying time of all; remembering the stable where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an It." <sup>i</sup>

Those who have seen the child are no longer at ease.

Matthew gives it to us in a single verse: "They left for their own country by another road."

When I was a child, each December, my father used to take my older sister and me to a pancake supper hosted by the local Civitan Club. On the way there, my father would make sure we passed all the Christmas lights between our home and the Civitan Club. We would look at the lights and the nativities set up in the yards. But on the way back, we would pretend that we were the three magi, and Dad would take us home by another way. Even though I knew it was only an imaginary journey, I can still recall the thrill I felt as we took a meandering path back to the safety of home. A different way. I even recall thinking that something about our house had changed when we returned. The surroundings of course were exactly the same, but something was transformed.

This new year may look very much like the one you left behind. After all, the context of our lives has changed little, if at all. But, we have seen the child. We can't be content with what has been. For if we have seen *him*, we will be changed. This is the pain of Matthew's story of the magi. This is the promise of Matthew's story of the magi. This is the possibility of Matthew's story of the magi. *Epiphany*.

Beginning next Sunday, we will explore the parables of Jesus that offer a window into another world, another way of being in the world. In this new year just beginning, we will consider the call of Jesus to embody this unease with the way things are.

Friends at Second Church, it is not enough for us to embrace the child lying in the manger, to enjoy the beauty of Christmas as a temporary respite from the harshness of the world. *It is not enough*. We must follow the magi who could no longer be at ease in a world where people clutch their gods of power, pride, wealth, and violence. We too must be uneasy

in this old dispensation. It is not our home. And so let us be changed.

No longer at ease when neighbors lack shelter or food.

No longer at ease when children feel unsafe at school or home.

No longer at ease when elders are left lonely and afraid.

No longer at ease with the proliferation of division and the spreading of hatred.

No longer at ease when people turn to false idols and reject the living God.

No longer at ease when the church is silent in the face of suffering and injustice.

No longer at ease because we have seen the child and heard the message of the Magi.

We will no longer be at ease in this old dispensation because there is a new world already on its way. The journey ahead of us will offer abundant opportunity to display the difference faith makes. So let us go another way.

What has changed because of Christmas? What has changed in you? In us? We will see.

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<sup>i</sup> W.H. Auden, "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio" in *Collected Longer Poems*. Random House, 1934.