

**Epiphany**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

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**The Problem in the Text**

In St. Matthew's Gospel we find that the promise of the incarnation, the baby Jesus, is threatened. This comes about by his very birth in a manger in a cold stable because there was no room at the inn. Giving birth in those days was a dangerous time for any mother and baby, let alone in a strange place without women of the family to help and in a messy straw and unclean animal pen. Now we learn that the arrival of three wise men strangers from the East speaking of prophecy and a new king, has caused King Herod to become uneasy in his reign. There is an air of menace, of danger that surrounds this poor baby and his family.

The incarnation, God taking our form and bringing himself into the world, made the Almighty vulnerable. He became incarnate flesh and as vulnerable as any of us.

What interested me this year in this part of the story of the three wise men was the way they made themselves vulnerable in their journey, their pilgrimage to find the Christ child and to confirm his birth.

**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.  
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 arriving at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you might 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  
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.

### **The Problem in the World**

Thinking of the journey of the wise men and the details T.S. Eliot imagines, how hard it must have been, made me think of our personal and individual experience of journey in our faith: what does it mean to walk in faith and to encounter the Christ Incarnate? Who are, as T.S. Eliot put it, “the voices singing in our ears, saying, That this was all folly?”

St. Matthew’s Gospel, through this story of the three wise men, is inviting us into a journey of wonder and signs that the world might call “folly:” following a star, a light that the darkness does not overcome; a journey into the unknown, where the road takes to places that are foreign or uncomfortable; of expectation to see the baby King born, God incarnate, a savior, a judge, the shepherd of Israel; to offer our gifts of adoration fit for such a King; and to feel the weight of the menace of the world – the danger the powers of the world that will reject this gift, a world that will also tell us we are on a journey that is folly.

### **The Grace in the Text**

But is the very journey of the wise men that also confirms for us and announced to the world what Mary and Joseph and the shepherds knew about this child. The larger, wider world beyond Judea was affected by this birth. This Christ was a messiah not just for Israel but for the Gentiles – for the whole world. The three wise men – not of the People of God, Israel - took note of signs in the stars and paid attention to the whispers of prophecies that made their way along the trade routes.

These outsiders set out on an arduous journey in pursuit of the Truth. They arrived in Judea and seemed to shock everyone by their appearing. You can almost hear the concern their arrival in Jerusalem: what would they have to do with us? What do they know that we do not? You can imagine how that would be unsettling to people in Jerusalem, both to the royal court and to the religious leaders to hear strangers ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” But it is in their very unsettling of Herod and Jerusalem that we find ourselves turning with the wise men toward Bethlehem, a little dusty town. We set our feet away from the powers of the world and toward the light shining over a stable.

### **The Grace in the World**

A journey begins for each one of us as we hear of Christ and find him in our lives. Like the magi, we will set out on a journey that will take us on a winding road through sometimes rough territory to an unexpected place. As Eliot wrote, “Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.” I love that phrase because “satisfactory” is such a funny way to put it – but that is exactly what finding faith and confirming belief and hope is: everything changes but then again, very little changes. You aren’t the same and the way you interpret everything about your life is different, but the world continues on as if nothing happened. That will put a damper on your faith at times, but you have found a certain type of “death” in that Birth. You aren’t the same after meeting that incarnate God, the one who has made Himself so preciously vulnerable for you. He’s the same Lord who will humble himself upon the cross out of love for you.

The wise men gazing upon that baby felt the joy and the weight of the birth... “this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.” They were irrevocably changed by the encounter. The wise men then took a different path home – as St. Matthew tells us, they were warned about Herod in a dream and returned to their own country by another road. We are all on that other road, for all its unknowns and perils, sure in our steps with the wise men, because we have seen and confirmed this Birth. The journey was not and is not folly. It was and is all worth it. “I should be glad of another death,” said the Magi. I too will be glad of a chance to meet the incarnate Lord.

**Amen.**