

January 3, 2021  
St John's  
II Christmas, almost Epiphany  
Sermon by John Bellaimy, Priest Associate

In the name of God, by whose descent among us the worlds are reconciled.

This morning I give thanks to God for sending me three teachers, Fr. Richard Polakowski, Prof Wyatt MacGaffey, and Prof. Sandra Berwind. All of them severe taskmasters, the kind of teacher I am not. They taught me to write. They also had us learn a few poems that have helped me, over the years, make sense of my spiritual life.

Polo and Berwind both assigned *Journey of the Magi*, by TS Eliot. It's set in ancient Persia or some such place, where one of the magi sits with his students. They seem to have notebooks and pens, and the old man is telling them his most important story.

{YouTube; Edward Petherbridge recitation}

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 shart  
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 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.  
In 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 a meadow.  
Then we came to an old 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 arrived at evening, not a moment too soon,  
Finding the place; it was (you may 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.

They offered gifts fit for a king, but must have wondered why a king should be in a barn, not a palace. Why there were no nursemaids or chamberlains. No ladies-in-waiting, no scribes recording the tribute or treasurers locking the presents up for safekeeping.

*Write down this*, he told his students. The gods who move the stars wanted us to see this birth. We thought it would be a king. We were wrong. It was the most important thing I have ever done, but honestly, when we got home, it wasn't home any more. I am so alone. I don't get these people. I don't like them. I have nothing to live for.

Maybe he learned that the gods favor something other than gold, frankincense, and myrrh? That kings are insecure, sitting in their terraces, picking at sherbet made with mountain snow and fruits from the temperate valley? That the three trees on the low sky were ill omens and the baby was doomed?

Honestly? If I were there, listening to the old man, I'd want to cheer him up. Distract him from such gloomy thoughts. Sir, you are being too hard on yourself! Who knows what that baby might have grown up to be! Maybe not a king, but someone good and important.

This year, we see everything through the lens of covid. Of racial injustice. And the increase of cruelty in public life. Every letter from my boss, every sermon, every podcast reminds me that 2020 is a magnifying glass and something is about to catch fire, if it isn't already blazing. Things are bad, and the forces of selfishness are a malignant army. I know today is technically 2021, but this has been a dreadful year.

Lisa reminded us on Christmas Eve that the incarnation, the birth of Christ in such a humble place, is God's reminder that we are never alone. That at the center of our story is joy. Not a good mood or a decent stretch of days of feeling happy. She quoted the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu: joy is the byproduct, not the goal. When you know you are loved and you treat others with real love, you get joy. The big story of Christianity is that God loved the world enough to step out of eternity to live inside time and space for 33 years and show anyone who wanted to see what love looks like.

Students wrote down our wise man's sayings, though his sad, distracted manner might have meant fewer people sought him out. He still studied the stars, and maybe told people when the best day would be for their wedding, or their military campaign. But the secret they found where the star stopped? It made no sense. The gifts were inappropriate. They might have even caused that poor baby's murder, if the angel in the dream was right.

And what were they supposed to have done? Settle in Nazareth and watch the carpenter's son to see if he really became king? No, they had to go home. Their eyes had been opened just enough to see the futility of their little bubbles of comfort and education.

*We* know the Christian story *now*. Jesus' sermons about love and his tantrum in the shopping mall outside the Temple. His embrace of children and his angry rebuke of religious hypocrites. We know: they killed him. We know: he came back somehow, and many people saw him. We know: the harder the Empire tried to erase him from history, the more people came to trust that he really had been an incarnation of God. Worthy of a star and angels and even visits from three foreigners who would never figure it out.

Happiness is not the point of Christmas. Joy is the point, and joy is not necessarily cheerful. It's way more important than that. In fact, my most important spiritual moments, when I've known that God's indomitable love is real, despite all the forces of fear, I cried my eyes out, sobbing with gratitude.

So I'll close with another poem that never fails to bring me to that severe, tearful, joyful place. Chad chose my favorite hymn to begin our service today. It is every bit as melancholy as our poem about the Magi, and maybe that's why I trust it. I don't know of any more accurate explanation for my own Christianity than this hymn, based on a Christmas poem by the former poet laureate Richard Wilbur, *A Stable Lamp Is Lighted*.

<https://youtu.be/wfxiZT2WIDU>

May you know deep down how much you are loved, whether you accept that gift love shaking with tears, like I do, or dancing, or laughter, or with fierce resolution.

Or all of the above. Happy Christmas.