

Amity

Believe . . . Belong . . . Become . . .

Matthew 2:1-12

January 3, 2009

Birth or Death? Epiphany Sunday

T.S. Eliot: 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 when 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 dirty 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 wineskins.*



Rev. Tuck Taylor, Pastor



AMITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

825 N. Estes Drive • Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-967-7546 • amityumc.org

Amity

Believe . . . Belong . . . Become . . .

*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.*

What a powerful poem! There is so much here to take in, to explore and to discuss. One reading is not enough – we will post this on Amity's website so you can re-read it, chew on it a bit. I have to admit that I haven't spent a lot of time in my life thinking about the Magi's journey, or for that matter, their return home. I've thought a lot about them arriving to see the baby Jesus in their bathrobes and crowns askance. But this powerful poem calls me to consider the Magi and their journey with a profundity I've never considered before.

“Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?”

What a journey it must have been for these wise souls in search of God. How much it must have cost them: time, money, relationships, no doubt, and alas, even their reputations: “voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly”, all to get a glimpse of God.

Can you imagine what the people said as the Magi set out to find God, to follow a star in the distance in search of “God among us”? Oh, the ridicule they must have endured.



AMITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

825 N. Estes Drive • Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-967-7546 • amityumc.org

Amity

Believe . . . Belong . . . Become . . .

But the Magi were faithful to their calling. Callings, by their very nature, are difficult. I had a friend recently come and talk to me about a vocational “calling” he felt. “I’m no expert on call discernment,” I said, “but this I know: callings are never easy. If they were, you wouldn’t need a ‘calling’.” The Magi responded to the call to step away from all they knew, from the comfort and security of their lives, away from their reputation of being smart and reputable men, and to seek God. And in time, they encounter the birth of this baby, God in their midst. One would think that all would be well with the world at this point. But, of course, they have to go back; the Magi have to return to the communities they left, the people who laughed and ridiculed them, and the relationships that had been broken. They have to go back and watch as those who they loved continued to live as if nothing has happened. No baby. No God. No God among us. Going about life as they always had, clinging to the gods of pleasure, and comfort and material things.

“Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?”

It must have felt like death. They had seen God. **No longer would they find the same jokes funny – the jokes that put down those who were different. No longer would they be able to walk pass the poor or the homeless, turning a blind eye; for the baby, God, is poor and homeless.**

No longer would they be able to sit idly by while the poor got trampled and the rich become more powerful; for God came into the world in a stable.

No longer could they pass judgment on the unwed mothers or the illegal immigrants, as the mother of God was unwed, and she, Joseph and the babe would flee to Egypt, secretly, to reside as illegal immigrants.

No longer could they refuse to offer room to weary strangers, for it might be God in their very midst, seeking room, shelter.

No longer could they turn away from those who are ridiculed, judged, pushed to the side – for these are the very ones God chose to come among.



AMITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

825 N. Estes Drive • Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-967-7546 • amityumc.org

Amity

Believe . . . Belong . . . Become . . .

Oh, it must have felt a lot like death; this birth.

“Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?”

This business of seeking God is risky, dangerous, and yes, life-threatening. It will call you out of living a 2-bit life with me-centered priorities and into the world, into areas of life you never dreamed of. It will call you to the edges, to the outcasts, to the hungry and suffering. It will call you to give of yourself, your money, your time. It will call you to look at the way you are living your life, treating your loved ones, and your not-so-loved ones. It will call you to forgive the unforgiveable, to offer a second, third, fourth chance to those who need it but don't deserve it, it will call you to love mercy and seek justice.

It is a calling that makes a difference in the lives of those around us: it makes a difference to the homeless person on the street; the prisoner in the cell; the teenage mother next door; the one dying from AIDS; the children dying from starvation; the homosexual looking for a place to worship and serve; the illegal immigrants wanting to live and to belong; the sick needing healthcare.

This journey is not for the faint of heart. There is nothing about faithful Christian discipleship that is easy or comfortable. If that's what you're looking for, you're in the wrong place. God enters this world to usher in a new heaven and a new earth – the ultimate birth. We live in the grip of the birthing pains. And there are days it feels a lot more like death than life. But the old must pass away in order for the new to spring forth.

Over the holidays I happened to see an old acquaintance at the Piggly Wiggly. I was just walking through, doing my shopping. Nice ole fellow, though I always knew he didn't think much of me going into the ministry. We stopped and exchanged niceties – how are you? How was your Christmas? How's the church doing?” He attends a church where they call their ministers, ministers are not appointed like the Methodist. “Oh, great,” he said. “God is really at work in our church, doing mighty things.” “Really? That's wonderful!” “Yea,” he said, “Got a woman preacher, you know?”



AMITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

825 N. Estes Drive • Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-967-7546 • amityumc.org

Amity

Believe . . . Belong . . . Become . . .

“No,” I said, “I didn’t know that.” He didn’t tell me her name. “I didn’t want her.” He said. “Me and my whole family voted against her, but we got outvoted.” And then he looked at me and said, “I was wrong. I was wrong in my estimation of women.” And then he looked at me and said, “Guess if I was wrong about her, I was probably wrong about a lotta’ other stuff too.”

He encountered the Gospel, saw the birth – God in his midst, in their midst, breaking old patterns, making a new way. It was a birth, but I bet it felt a whole lot like a death as well.

The question for us this morning: are we willing, is this church willing, to give of ourselves, our money, our time, our reputations, to meet God and have our minds and our hearts changed, to be a part of this birth, and this death?

Howard Thurman wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flock
Then the work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among brothers and sisters
To make music in the heart.

Were we led all that way for Birth or Death? Yes. Yes.



AMITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

825 N. Estes Drive • Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-967-7546 • amityumc.org

Amity

Believe . . . Belong . . . Become . . .

Let us pray:

You are with us, O God, to knit us together in mutual love and caring. You pour out abundant gifts that enrich our existence and challenge us to give our best. Let us stand with courage and proclaim the birth of redemption that comes in Christ. Fill our hearts with his reconciling love and then send us into the world to continue his work of hope, peace, joy and love. Stir within us a love for mercy and a desire for justice and empower us for the hard work of faithful discipleship.

Lord hear our prayers for those people and those situations you have placed upon our hearts this day, those spoken and those that remain hidden. Hear now our silent prayers...

All these things we ask and pray to you about in the name of Christ Jesus - he who was born under the light of a star, and who gives to us the light we need to walk into each day as your holy and beloved people,
those marked to be a light in the world, for your sak



AMITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

825 N. Estes Drive • Chapel Hill, NC 27514 • 919-967-7546 • amityumc.org