

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2008  
Epiphany  
Isaiah 60:1-6  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12  
Psalm 71:1-7, 10-14

Because we know almost nothing about the wise men, the imaginations of the Church have grown fruitful. If we were brought up in the Christian faith, these characters have ridden across our minds and hearts ever since we were taken to our first Sunday school pageant. Even the most sophisticated children secretly envy those who have been selected to play the wise men. Parents will ransack attics for pieces of fabric -- the more brilliant and exotic the better -- and someone in the family will create a costume that will be linked to no particular age or time or culture but will somehow speak of far-off places, distant shores, desert sands and starry skies -- all at the same time.

They have always fascinated us, these travelers who must have loomed in the entrance to the cave before an astonished -- and probably alarmed -- Mary and Joseph. All the language we use about them tends to reach for a larger-

than-life quality. One of the church's hymns claims that to rival their gifts we would have to bring to this "brightest and best of the sons of the morning, odors of Edom, gems of the mountain, pearls of the ocean." When Isaiah speaks of such visitors, he speaks in the most extravagant terms. "Kings!" Isaiah proclaims. "Kings come to the brightness of your dawn." And because the traditional three camels no seem enough to do justice to the celebration, we turn to Isaiah's evocation of "a multitude of camels . . . the young camels of Midian and Ephah." Then, "all those from Sheba" are invited too.

But even Isaiah fails to satisfy our wish to paint a vast and wonderful canvas for these visitors to the stable. We go to the psalmist for more vivid images, and he obliges by bringing on stage "the kings of Tarshish and of the isles . . . the kings of Sheba and Seba," saying of them that they "all fall down" before this child.

The Venerable Bede, of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, gives us images that were to be reproduced in artwork through the centuries: Melchior is said to be old, white-haired, and bearded; Casper, young, ruddy, and beardless; Balthazar, black-

skinned and thickly bearded – the same writing offers the association of Matthew’s gifts: gold to signify the kingship of the Christ child, incense to represent his divinity, and myrrh suggesting his humanity and his death. We’ve just sung about those gifts – and perhaps it is the gifts themselves that lend much to our imaginations.

The traveler Marco Polo claimed that he was shown the three tombs of the Magi at Saveh, south of Tehran in the 1270s. In Persia is the city of Saba, from which the Three Magi set out and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. And above them there is a square building, beautifully kept. The bodies are still entire, with hair and beard remaining.

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.

T.S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi" (c. 1927)

They didn't stand just slack-jawed at the sight of the star,  
you see – they were compelled to *follow* it. As Lancelot  
Andrewes preached at Whitehall on Christmas Day in 1622,  
their *vidimus* became their *venimus*" – the seeing made  
them come.

What sort of folly is this? To follow a star, to *believe* that the  
star is telling us something? What sort of folly is this? To

worship a mere Child, to *believe* that this Child will somehow change our destiny?

What sort of folly causes us – you, me, someone else – to believe such a thing: That God would come to earth in the form of...a *baby*?

It is the folly of faith.

It is the folly of hope.

It is the folly of love and it is the folly of knowing.

Faith that somehow, for some unexplainable reason, God loves us so much that he would send his Son to live with us, to teach us, to feed us, to heal us.

Hope that somehow, for some unexplainable reason, God thinks we can do better.

The folly of knowing, deep in our hearts, that all this is true: That Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, came to earth in human form and lived among God's creatures; that God is right: that we *can* do better.

Amen.