

**Something More**  
Luke 2:1-20  
December 24, 2024  
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On my Christmas reading list every year is T.S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi." It's an accessible and simple poem compared to most of the poems Eliot wrote, and the opening lines are, I think, striking:

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.

"Such a long journey." It begins months earlier. I walked into Home Depot on the east side of town the day after Halloween, and the store was completely decked out in Christmas trees aglow with lights and glittery garland.

And the children begin to wish and dream and make lists months ahead. When I was a child, the arrival of the Sears Roebuck Catalog in the mail one day in the fall set off weeks of dreaming, list making, and hoping. The pace quickens at Thanksgiving, and for these past four weeks most of us have been very busy trying to accomplish all we need to accomplish. For some it can be almost oppressive.

I love the anecdote related to me by a colleague about a Sunday school teacher in a former parish. Her six-year-olds were learning about the ways the church gets itself ready for Christmas in Advent. "We have a special name for the season," she explained. "Does anyone know what we call the four weeks before Christmas?" A bright little girl put her hand up and said, "I know. It's called Advil."

Sometimes that seems about right. We do stretch ourselves thin preparing for this, and now it is here, and all that remains is to hear and think about the story and the reason we do all of it. The whole world becomes silent tonight, to listen again to those words in Luke, to hear again the angel's song, the lowing of the cattle, the baby's first cry.

But Christmas is a season filled with paradox. Many of us relish the joy of family gatherings in this special season and make our way to church on Christmas Eve to celebrate this story we all cherish. Yet others of us find ourselves lonely, depressed, disappointed, or completely stressed out in the midst of it all.

Our experience echoes the birth of Jesus. In spite of all of our sanitized Christmas carols, it's a story filled with stress and loneliness born of incredible hardship. It begins when Mary becomes pregnant out of wedlock, a scandalous proposition in any day. Joseph, a righteous man, we are told by the Gospel writer Matthew, considers walking away from Mary and the whole mess to save his own reputation.

Then there is the difficult 100-mile trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem on foot, with a pregnant wife and no extended family to support them along the way. According to Google Maps, it would take 34 hours to travel it on foot, not counting stops for rest.

And, of course, Google does not factor in contingencies such as marauding bandits, deep rain-washed wadis cutting through the path, where to spend each night, or full-term pregnancies

with Mary's water threatening to break at any minute, and the whole dangerous, exhausting journey is just to fill out some government census forms. Compared to all of this, two hours spent languishing in the DMV waiting room seems hardly worth grumbling over.

When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem days later, completely spent, they face more discouraging news. There is no room for them in the inn. The expectant couple has to settle for the cattle stall out back. And with no midwife to help, Joseph probably had to deliver the baby himself.

But in the midst of this dark and messy story, there is something more. Three unlikely messengers from God arrive on the scene.

The first is the angel of the Lord which came to Joseph in his moment of crisis up in Nazareth, calming his anxiety, soothing his fears, and persuading him to wed Mary in spite of the risks.

More messengers--a host of angels this time--arrive just after the birth to a group of lowly shepherds who are out tending their flocks in the nearby fields. Go to Bethlehem, they are told, for your long-awaited messiah has just been born. And when these shepherds-turned-divine messengers arrive with the good news that God has come among us, we find that Mary and Joseph finely are no longer so alone and so afraid.

The glory of this story—and the reason countless millions of people around the world are pausing to hear it again even though they have heard it dozens of times and many know every detail by heart—the glory of it and the reason you and I have come here this evening is that it is a story about God, God coming into our dark, messy world; God revealed in a human life; God living among us; God revealed as he was born and lived and worked and laughed and loved; God revealed as he taught and healed and challenged religious convention and injustice; God revealed as he reached out to touch the lives of all—his best friends, their families, lawyers and priests, poor and oppressed, outcast and marginalized; God revealed in that man's honest, strong, unconditional love; God revealed as he suffered and died. God comes that close to us.

And the ongoing miracle of this story is that messengers from God are still arriving in the darkness of this season, in the messy story of our world to announce and to live this good news. Bringing comfort where there is sorrow. Reaching out for relationship. where there is loneliness. Working for peace in the midst of turmoil. Offering hope because a baby is born; God is here.

A generation after Jesus lived, one of his followers, thinking about him and what he did and what it all meant, an old man, I think, with most of his life behind him, wrote these words about Christmas: "In him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

As you light a small candle this evening and watch as it sputters and then flames and miraculously joins the light of the people sitting around you and slowly, surely, fills this space with light, remember, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." Make a place in your heart for that light this evening. Keep it burning tomorrow and the next day...Keep it burning for whatever dark and messy days lie ahead. For you, too, are God's messenger of this good news.

Amen.