

The Heartbeat of God

A Sermon on John 1:10-18

*Glenview Community Church
(United Church of Christ)
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According to the fact-checking site, Snopes, the story I am about to tell you has floated around the internet for more than 20 years, dates back at least to 1931, and has absolutely no basis in historical fact. Snopes rates it completely and utterly **FALSE**.ⁱ But, even if only a yarn, it does convey a certain truth. The tale is about an incident aboard an aircraft carrier, the flagship of the U.S. fleet, as it sailed the eastern seaboard, one dark, dreary, densely foggy, starless night:

The Admiral was on the bridge when it was reported that another ship had been spotted in the distance, lights visible, on a direct collision course. “Radio the ship,” the Admiral said; “tell it to turn 15 degrees.” The message was relayed. Back came the reply: “Negative. Turn your ship 15 degrees.”

The Admiral was not pleased. He commanded a second message be sent: “You tell that ship that this is the *USS Big Boat* of the United States Navy, and it is ordered to turn 15 degrees immediately.” Again, the same reply: “Negative. Turn your ship 15 degrees.”

Furious, the Admiral grabbed the microphone and barked out the order: “You turn your ship 15 degrees right now. This is the Admiral speaking.” To which a markedly more timid and nervous voice answered: “Sorry, Sir. It’s up to you. But you really do need to turn your ship 15 degrees. This is the lighthouse.”

John translates the Christmas story into a remarkable piece of poetry about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. Full of glory. “In him was life,” pens John, “and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Light. So powerful a symbol. Candles raised on Christmas Eve...

Darkness cannot extinguish light. But people can (and do) ignore it. “*He was in the world...yet the world did not know him.*” That is the way John puts it. “*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*” When people pay no attention to the light, argues John, they miss God, for Jesus is the heartbeat of God’s love; Jesus is the One who reveals the fullness of God; Jesus is the life – the light – that illumines God’s way.

In his Christmas story account, Matthew includes a narrative about a band of people from a faraway place who walked a thousand miles in darkness, at least four full months traveling at night, determined to follow the light of a star in search for the Light of the World.

Who were the magi? How many were there? No one knows. Some say kings -- citing Isaiah 60:3, which reads: "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Others say Zoroastrian priests – religious leaders of one of the world's oldest monotheistic faiths. Most say astronomers, scientists knowledgeable of the heavens, who noticed one star everyone else missed. A few say astrologers -- magicians practicing the fraudulent arts of divination. Professor Richard Horsley of the University of Massachusetts writes they were a caste of Median or Persian political advisors and court officials ferociously opposed to Rome's eastern expansion.ⁱⁱ

What we do know is that they were Gentiles. They were familiar with and comfortable within centers of power. They went directly to King Herod's palace and were given an audience. They were people of means. They brought costly gifts with them -- gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Upon arriving in Judea, the magi ask King Herod: "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" Herod calls for the priests and the scribes to find out where this threat to his throne has been born. He is told the scriptures say the messiah will be born in Bethlehem. But notice: no one in King Herod's court goes to look for the child. No one asks the magi if they can tag along and help with the search. No one pays any attention to the possibility that the light exists. Only the magi bend their knees in homage and have their lives transformed by its shining.

T.S. Eliot, poet of "The Waste Land" (1922) and "The Hollow Men" (1925) – radically nihilistic works, rejecting of religion, portraying life as meaningless – underwent a spiritual transformation and was baptized into the Church of England's Anglo-Catholicism movement. His mentor, Virginia Wolff, needled him regarding his evolution from religious disillusionment to profound faith, predicting he would "drop his Christianity with his wife, as one might empty the fishbones after the herring." He did divorce his wife; but he kept the faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eliot's conversion was not sudden. He always was skeptical of Damascus Road experiences. Rather, his was a long difficult spiritual sojourn. Finally experiencing God's heartbeat in Jesus Christ left him believing but uncomfortable. He related his experience of seeing the Light of the World to that of the magi, in a poem first published in 1927 as a Christmas card. Writes Eliot:

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The way was 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 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 lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly.
We had evidence and no doubt. I have 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.^{iv}

Having been warned not to report to Herod what they had found, Matthew tells us they returned to their country “by another way.” They took another road home. But it also must be that their lives took another course. As Eliot experienced, seeing the Light of the World results in the death of our old selves, our old ways, our ease “in the old dispensation.”

So, today we approach the communion table and, in the mystery of the sacrament, come face-to-face with God. Through the bread and wine, light breaks and we experience grace upon grace, we feel the very heartbeat of God’s love beating in our souls, and we know we no longer can be content with the way things are. We must live reflecting that light that shines on us.

Robert Fulghum, author of *Everything I Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, tells of attending a two-week seminar at a peace institute on the island of Crete, where a terrible battle had ensued between Nazi paratroopers and village partisans during World War II. As the conference closed, Alexander Papaderos, the peace institute's founder, asked if there were any last questions. Fulghum broke the silence. "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?" A ripple of laughter followed as the people stirred to go. But Papaderos, sensing Fulghum was serious, held up his hand: "I will answer." From his wallet, he removed a quarter-sized round mirror:

"When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

"I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the black places in the hearts of men—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life."

And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk.^v

ⁱ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-obstinate-lighthouse/>

ⁱⁱ Horsley, Richard, *The Liberation of Christmas*. New York: Crossroad, 1988.

ⁱⁱⁱ Spurr, Barry. October 12, 2011. <https://abc.net.au/religion/ts-eliot-extraordinary-journey-of-faith/10101092>

^{iv} Eliot, T.S. "The Journey of the Magi," *Collected Poems*, 1909–1962. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1991.

^v Fulghum, Robert. "Are There Any Questions," *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*. New York: Villard, 1989.