

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
Matthew 2:1-12

January 8, 2005  
The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6" 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for out of you will come a ruler

who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The sweat running down into my eyes stung, making me squint and struggle to see. The straps of my sandals were burying themselves into the arch of my foot and I could feel the blisters rising up under my skin to enfold the stiff leather. My hair was becoming increasingly disheveled as we ran—a combination of my sweat, the wind, and the dust flying up around us. My hand was clenched tightly to Kristen's, my sister-in-law, as we darted through traffic, across streets, and through back alleys—second only to our goal of catching the black car zooming through the streets of Charleston on that hot September afternoon was staying together. We were women on a mission, following a star. Not particularly wise women at the time, weaving through other pedestrians and dodging city traffic, but surely we were women to be reckoned with. We were determined to catch that star traveling in the shiny, black sedan. If but for just a glimpse of his profile, we were following our star, Jude Law.

Earlier that day I'd been out for a morning walk in Charleston where we were visiting for a family wedding. I turned a corner of one of the downtown streets and came across a movie set. The streets had been covered with dirt and mulch, there were women with parasols and hoopskirts. Horse-drawn carriages lined the streets and men in tattered rags were chained together in front of what was made to look like an old courthouse or jail. I stood at the corner of the two-city-block set, feeling out of place in my running shoes, t-shirt, and spandex shorts. One of the guys working on the set offered me a bottle of water off of the breakfast buffet set up for the actors and crew. He explained that they were filming a scene for the movie *Cold Mountain*. He pointed to one of the actors whose face was all smeared with grease and grime, who's tattered, raggedy clothing was just like that of all the others on the set, and excitedly whispered that that was Jude Law! "Wow!" I exclaimed, though I had no idea who Jude Law was and was surprised that a guy working in the movies would be so excited about him. Later I was to learn that Jude Law was one of the most sought-after young actors in Hollywood. I hung around the set for a bit and watched the filming of the scene and then realized that I needed to get back to the hotel for one of those awkward "get to know the family of your future sister in law though you'll never see most of them again" breakfast things. I was excited to share the news of my discovery of the movie set, but not nearly as excited about it as was my other sister-in-law—not the bride, but the bridesmaid. Kristen, Corey's much younger sister, has a real thing for Hollywood and those who live the life of the rich and famous. She has framed, autographed pictures of movie stars all over her

bedroom walls. The news of the handsome, young, Jude Law visiting town was met with her squeal of glee. I promised her that after breakfast, I would take her back down to the set too see if we could find Mr. Law, who we soon began referring to as Jude, as if he were an old classmate we were trying to meet up with for lunch. Suddenly, I was caught up in the excitement of it all. Whereas hours earlier I didn't even recognize his name, now I was hot on Jude Law's trail, caught up in Kristen's enthusiasm. It was like I became another person—normally I won't even j-walk but there I was leading Kristen in and out of traffic, chasing the black sedan we'd seen Jude Law get into as he left the set. It was crazy, and free-spirited, and a little bit dangerous. I was star struck. I was shaken out of my normal day-to-day routine to experience something new and different and though it was flaky and really quite pointless, it was also exhilarating.

It isn't often that I feel exhilarated. How about you? When was the last time your heart was racing, you were short of breath, and you were simply overwhelmed by the moment? The most recent time my heart raced, I was short of breath, and I felt overwhelmed was in the middle of a panic attack—anything but exhilarating! That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the kind of exhilaration one feels when we are fully aware that we are alive—when our senses are attuned to circumstances of the moment—when the worries and anxieties of our everyday lives are superceded by excitement and an overwhelming feeling of well-being and goodness.

In an adult education session last month, Marty Johnson spoke of such an experience. She was, at the fine age of 67, competing in an Over 30—not Seniors, but just Over 30—tennis tournament, I think she said her opponent was in her early thirties. Marty said that she played that match with all of the heart and passion she could muster and, in the end, she won. Marty grew more exhilarated with every sentence as she told the story so I can only imagine how high she was flying in the actual moment. What a sweet moment of exhilaration it was for her.

Perhaps you've had a moment of exhilaration similar to Marty's—a moment in which you've achieved a goal or attained such success that you're just giddy. Maybe your exhilaration came as the minister pronounced you man and wife and you marched out of the church with the love of your life. Maybe your exhilaration came when the little line appeared on the pregnancy test and you found out you were finally going to have a baby. Maybe your exhilaration came when the doctor gave you a clean bill of health after a long illness. Maybe your exhilaration came when you stepped on the scale and the little dial didn't spin past your goal weight. Regardless of the source of the exhilaration, I hope that you have known that feeling of jubilation and celebration—a feeling akin to what I had as I went running through the streets of Charleston, giggling and gasping for air with Kristen.

This morning we're celebrating Epiphany, the day on which the Wise Men from the East finally arrived at the stable where Jesus was born. We often think it must have been an exhilarating moment for the magi as they knelt to worship the king and offer him their gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh. (Corey, who is terribly cynical about the consumerism of Christmas, likes to say this began the tradition of the exchange of useless gifts. After all, what's a baby to do with a pot of myrrh?) It had taken them twelve days, traveling on camels, following a star that only shone during the night, to reach their destination. And though I want to think that they had a feeling of exhilaration at finding the infant king, I can't help but think that perhaps, after such a long and treacherous journey, they were kneeling at the side of the manger with a sense of relief as much as, if not even more than, a sense of exhilaration.

In my experience, moments of epiphany, times when we encounter God, are more likely to be experiences of profound relief than of soaring exhilaration. This may be the case because the journey

to meet God, to encounter that baby in the manger, is often long and difficult such that, when it's over, we just feel so relieved. Instead of rejoicing and celebrating as we might in an exhilarating moment, we just want to curl up and rest beside the manger, content to just be in the presence of God. And not to belabor (no pun intended) the point of a sermon of a couple of weeks ago, I can totally relate. After giving birth to Nathan, I didn't feel that sense of awesome wonder and exhilaration that I had been told I would. Instead, I felt a profound sense of relief and gratitude and just wanted to hold him tightly against me, just be in his presence. That was an epiphany for me—an encounter with God who surely was the orchestrator of such a sacred moment.

And that is, perhaps, what this Epiphany Sunday is about—it's not about big, huge exhilarating moments, it's about quiet, often subtle moments in which God interjects God's self into our world in such a way that we just can't ignore God any longer. In my moment of starstruck exhilaration in Charleston, I wasn't giving any thought to God. That was a purely worldly moment for me. And yet surely God was there, I just wasn't paying attention. It reminds me of a line from the premiere of the new TV show *The Book of Daniel* that aired on Friday night. Daniel is an Episcopal priest, husband of a high maintenance woman, father to three coming of age children, who is dedicated to his work, torn between allegiances and duties, and addicted to prescription pain killers. On occasion, Jesus shows up and talks with Daniel, occupying the passenger seat of Daniel's Volvo, showing up in the upstairs hallway of Daniel's home, or sitting across from him in his office at the church. In one scene, Daniel asks Jesus if he talks to everyone the way he talks to him. Jesus says that yes, he does talk to everyone, it's just that so few folks actually take the time to listen to him like Daniel does. And though it's just a fictional TV program, I think the script writers make a pretty profound point—to know God we must first be willing to know God, to listen for God.

And on this Epiphany Sunday, the day on which we officially conclude our Christmas celebrations, that is the point, I think. For most of us, having an epiphany won't be some grand event in which we're star struck and exhilarated. Those moments are too few and far between. Instead, epiphanies—times of closeness with God—are more likely to come when we're just being quiet, when we're listening for God. It's unlikely that we will be star struck or exhilarated. As far as I know, God hasn't sent a star for any of us to follow as we seek Christ in our lives. Instead, we will know God better when we listen and are still—not when we're living life at the speed of light, jumping from one event to the other, with nary a moment set aside to kneel at the manger, just relieved that we got there, to bask in the presence of God.

Now, being quiet and listening for God as a way of experiencing God may seem rather anti-climatic. So many of us are waiting for a grand epiphany that leaves us breathless and exhilarated. We're expecting to have some kind of out-of-body experience like we see folks in African-American churches having or like they show on the Billy Graham Revivals on TV. And in the absence of such intense experiences of God, we may feel an absence of God and spend our lives waiting for our big moment. And perhaps your big moment will come, but I'm not willing to bet on it for myself. Sure, I'd like to feel about God the way I felt while running through the streets of Charleston, my experience tells me that God is much more subtle with me. It's often not until an event has passed and I'm reflecting on it that I realize I experienced God in that moment. Most of my relationship with God is like how you feel after you've run into someone in a store and you have a brief conversation, but you couldn't place him or her in the moment and then suddenly, on your way out to your car, you remember the person's name and how you know them. "Oh, yeah. That's right. That was God."

And so it often is with God—a subtle nudge, a quiet voice, a stirring feeling—the things by which epiphanies come. Let's take a moment to listen for them now. Let us pray.