

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 2:1-12

January 7, 2006
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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 door that adjoins our bedroom and bathroom was open. I was drying my hair and had the television in the bedroom on, hoping to catch a glimpse of the weather map reflected in the bathroom mirror. But instead of the Dual Doppler Radar map I caught a glimpse of a noose being placed around Saddam Hussein's neck. I had intentionally avoided the internet and news papers because I have no interest in seeing such images, but I didn't think I'd see it during the local news spot. But because it was a holiday weekend, the news schedule was different. And so there I was—early in the morning—confronted by an image I did not want to see—forced to deal with the myriad of emotions and responses that image elicits for me.

And now, this image of imminent death joins the slide tray of images going around in my brain—slides of scenes I'd like to forget and yet just keep remembering. The view of the smoldering embers of the Pospechell's house from the window of the school bus I was riding the afternoon after their home burned to the ground. The motorcycle rider's mangled body splayed in the intersection of County Line and Park Streets in Fostoria, Ohio—the toes of the black, leather boots pointing to heaven directing the way for the rider who surely couldn't have survived such an accident. A myriad of images from TV commercials featuring starving African children with swollen bellies, flies landing on their faces, their bodies covered with filth and dust. And these disturbing images aren't just of things I've actually seen, sometimes they are just the images I paint in my own mind when I hear a news commentator or read a magazine article—a soldier's body dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, fingers, arms, and legs of the victims of September 11 scattered about on the streets of lower Manhattan, the bodies of Russian sailors lying lifeless in their submarine casket, the Kursk, on the floor of the Barents Sea. Surely our mind's eye is not limited by what we can see.

And with all of these kinds of images—of violence, war, and tragedy fixed upon earth's surface, is it any wonder that the Magi kept their gaze fixed on a distant star? Surely it is a lot easier to

live on this earth when your head is in the clouds than it is when your gaze is focused on the streets, homes, people, and war zones of the terra firma. And sure enough, as soon as the Magi arrived at their destination, when their focus turned from the heavens to the Son of Heaven, they began to see and comprehend a much more complex and challenging situation confronting them.

On their way to Bethlehem they had met with King Herod who asked that they return to him as soon as they found the Messiah so that he too may go worship him. Surely it must have seemed like an innocent enough request. After all, hadn't they just traveled miles and miles through the desert with the hunch that the star would lead them to something spectacular? It would make sense that King Herod would be willing to make the much shorter and easier journey to Bethlehem from Jerusalem to do the same. And yet we know what the Magi did not at the time, Herod wanted any threat to his power destroyed and that is why he wanted to know the whereabouts of this infant king whose birth had been foretold by the prophets and wise people from of old. Herod was out for blood and the Magi realized that after seeing images we don't even want to imagine in their dreams, images of baby boys being ripped from their mother's arms and brutally slaughtered, the Magi looked around them and realized that all was not well. In fact, they realized that some things were very, very wrong in this corner of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the Magi chose to ignore Herod's request—which must have put them in a fair amount of danger—and left Judah to return home by a route that did not take them through Jerusalem, the city from which Herod ruled.

On this Epiphany Sunday, we are well served to consider where we have our gaze fixed—on the stars or on the images around us. I remember Eckart Schtiller, director of the Luxembourg Study Abroad program in which I participated as a student at Miami of Ohio telling us, in our orientation upon arriving in Luxembourg City, to remember to look up while traveling and exploring, otherwise we would be bound to miss important things. And his advice was very good—if you don't look up when visiting Europe you miss—the great organs in the mighty cathedrals, the incredible paintings on the ceilings of palaces, the intense beauty of light shining through colored glass in light fixtures and windows, the graceful curve of a marble staircase that twists and turns its way up into a turret. And, if you're tall like my dad and forget to look up while you're walking in Europe, you could very well knock your forehead into a low doorframe—designed for folks of the average height of 1695, not 1995, and find yourself flat on your back on the stone floors of a bed and breakfast in the Cotswalds.

That being said, I have fallen—not flat on my back but flat on my face—because I was so busy looking up, entranced with what was above me that I tripped over something right at my feet. This happens frequently on my morning walks. I'll be headed up the big hill on Tower Road and hear a bird singing and no sooner do I look up into the branches to catch a glimpse of the winged one serenading me that I find myself tripping over a fallen branch or a crack in the pavement.

So, we can't just always be looking up, we sometimes also need to keep our gaze focused on what is at hand. But, that can be quite distressing because, as I mentioned previously, we are then faced with the reality of our surroundings—a reality we sometimes would just as soon ignore. If we look around, or for those of you who cannot see, if we listen to the sounds and voices around us, we become vulnerable to, and in a way responsible for, those sights and sounds. If we cannot hear the cries of a child, then we are not obligated to do anything about

them. If we do not see the images of starving children on television, then we do not think of them every time we sit down for a fine meal. If we avert our eyes and ignore the homeless person we're passing on the street, then we can continue to believe that everyone lives, if not in a home like ours, at least in some kind of a home. If we avoid folks who are sick, or who have Alzheimer's, or who are grieving, or who are even dying, then we can go on our merry way, thinking that these things could never happen to us. But when we look, when we listen, and most importantly, when we allow ourselves to feel what those sights and sounds illicit in us, well then, life can become quite wearying, and we can become filled with despair.

I've heard that despair in some of your voices as you wonder out loud about the state of this world—as you see the injustice, witness the hatred, watch the bloodshed. I know one of you who, like me, can't abide violent images and so you got rid of your television. I know one of you who gave up listening to NPR for a while because you were growing distraught at the news you heard day after day after day. I myself go to bed each night at nine o'clock—not always because I'm tired but rather because that's when—what I call the “murder shows” come on--CSI, NCIS, Cold Case, Medium, Law and Order, Law and Order Special Victims Unit, Law and Order Criminal Intent. Obviously there are folks in this world, including my beloved husband, for whom these images of death and violence are not haunting. But I am not one of them. I can only take so much and what the here and now real world offers is quite enough—I surely don't consider seeing any more of it dramatized or glorified on television entertainment.

I have been told, by some folks, that by avoiding these kinds of images, I am hiding my head in the sand, and yet for me I am merely struggling to keep my head above water—to keep from drowning in despair. For if we spend too much time among the violent, unjust, and heartbreaking images of this world—we can fill with despair which can lead to despondence and a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. We, in a word, become overwhelmed and therefore we think we can't do anything to right the wrongs and so we don't even try. And that is the danger of spending too much time with our gaze fixed on the images of this world.

However, the other extreme, keeping our heads in the clouds, is equally dangerous—maybe not for us but for the people, places, and resources God has called us to care for. If we're forever floating above the world, unable to deal with the images and sounds of this world, then we are not only denying reality, but we are denying God.

Obviously, as we strike forth into this New Year, we are called to achieve some kind of balance between gazing at the heavens and really seeing the world around us. If we don't occasionally look up to the heavens, to be inspired, renewed, and rejuvenated by the wonder of God and the glory of the heavens, then we lose sight of what it is we've been called to do. And, if we just focus on worshipping our heavenly creator and ignore that which said creator has created, then we lose sight of what it is we've been called to do.

And so I encourage you to, every evening as Nathan does, go to a window and search for the moon. Or, if you cannot see or it is a cloudy night, open the door and take in a deep breath of fresh air—breathe in the Holy Spirit that is all around you and let it give you perspective on your day and your place in creation. And I also encourage you to occasionally turn on the radio, or read the paper, or watch the television news because, depressing as it may be, it reflects the state

of being of so many folks—people who are our brothers and sisters in Christ and if we don't know about their plight, then we can't help them experience the love, mercy, justice, and new life that God intends for them.

And so, on this Epiphany Sunday, this first Sunday of the New Year, let us pray that our eyes will be open, not just to the images of this world, but also to the hope and promise of the next, so that in striking a balance between the two, we might live the lives God calls us to live and be Christ's disciples in this world. Let us pray together through the words of this hymn, that our eyes will be open, and that we may see . . .