

EPIPHANIES IN OUR LIVES: THRESHOLDS
A sermon delivered by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
SUNDAY, January 8, 2012

Readings:

“Where shall I look for Enlightenment?” Joan Chittister in *There Is a Season*

“Where shall I look for Enlightenment?” the disciple asked.

“Here,” the elder said.

“When will it happen?” the disciple asked.

“It is happening right now,” the elder answered.

“Then why don’t I experience it?” the disciple persisted.

“Because you do not look,” the elder said.

“But what should I look for?” the disciple continued.

“Nothing. Just look,” the elder said.

“But at what?” the disciple asked again.

“At anything your eyes alight upon,” the elder answered.

“But must I look in a special kind of way?” the disciple went on.

“No. The ordinary way will do,” the elder said.

“But don’t I always look the ordinary way?” the disciple said.

“No, you don’t,” the elder said.

“But why ever not?” the disciple asked.

“Because to look you must be *here*. You’re mostly somewhere else,” the elder said.

“Entrance Door” (excerpt) Rumi

“Remember, the entrance door to the sanctuary is inside you... Each of us has a secret companion musician to dance to. Unique rhythmic play, a motion in the street, we alone know and hear.”

“Wise Women Also Came” Jan L. Richardson in *Night Visions*

Wise women also came.

The fire burned

in their wombs

long before they saw

the flaming star

in the sky.

They walked in shadows,

trusting the path

would open

under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came,
seeking no directions,
no permission
from any king
They came
by their own authority,
their own desire,

their own longing.
They came in quiet,
spreading no rumors,
sparking no fears
to lead
to innocents' slaughter,
to their sister Rachel's
inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came,
and they brought
useful gifts:
water for labor's washing,
fire for warm illumination,
a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came,
at least three of them,
holding Mary in the labor,
crying out with her
in the birth pangs,
breathing ancient blessings
into her ear.

Wise women also came,
and they went,
as wise women always do,
home a different way.

Sermon – “Epiphanies in Our Lives: Thresholds” by The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

The last time I was with you we talked of wondrous births, and three wise men following astronomical & astrological signs in the sky.

That day they found the object of those signs, the child, twelve days after his birth, is called the Epiphany.

Epiphany, for the western church, occurs on January 6th; that was this past Friday. The word comes from the Greek meaning “to appear” or “to be made manifest. And in the Western church Epiphany signifies the day that Jesus was shown to be the divine Christ, the day that divinity was shown to the three wise men.

But in the Eastern church (and you have lots of Eastern Orthodox churches here in Thunder Bay – Greek and Ukrainian and Russian and Serbian. In the Eastern church, working with a different calendar, the Theophany is celebrated on January 19th., and is seen to be the day when Jesus, as a man – probably close to thirty years old by then – was baptized in the River Jordan by John, and a voice proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God.

In many countries Epiphany is called “Three Kings Day.” In Spain and Latin America, children leave hay in their shoes for the kings’ camels and hope to find candies and presents from the kings the next morning. In France each family bakes a cake with a coin in it. Whoever receives the piece with the coin is king or queen for the day. The Greeks celebrate Epiphany as a blessing-of-the-waters day. In coastal towns a procession from each church carries its cross to the water, where the priest blesses it and throws it in. People dive into the water after it, and whoever finds it receives presents and carries the cross through town for the rest of the day. (*The Book of Holidays around the World*)

The secular version of the word epiphany was first seen in England in the mid-1600s.

An epiphany came to be known as a sudden realization of a significant truth, often arising out of a commonplace event.

And though none of us, I suspect, have been baptized in the River Jordan, complete with heavenly pronouncements; or, at our birth, had three kings from the Orient, complete with camels, present us with expensive gifts.

But, many of us have had our own personal epiphanies – some almost magical moment that impacts us, changes us forever, that we remember vividly.

This evening, while I am writing this, I stop to admire the sunset – streaks of pink and deep blue. I remember the moment I woke up to the natural world. The revelation included a mountain, woods, a path, an eagle. Everything combined to give me a dope-slap, a thunderclap, an awakening to me what a gift the world was.

Another epiphany for me:

I was at the PRIDE celebration in my then hometown of Missoula, Montana. There’d been a variety of speakers, and then fifty women walked onto the risers and sang:

“A woman’s voice, how sweet the sound, arising out of me.

I once was still, but now I sing. I am heard, and I am free.”

From looking at the singers, I’d made the assumption that this was a Gay Women’s chorus. But, I really wanted to sing with these women. I figured, what the heck; if I had to, I could access my inner Bisexual.

Well, when they finished I scanned the faces to see if there was anyone I knew. And, lo and behold, there was a woman I knew from the Unitarian Universalist fellowship in Helena, a two and a half hour drive over the mountains. I didn’t know much about Beth or her personal life, but asked her about the chorus, where they met, who could join. And my life as a singer began.

And it was just a couple weeks later that a young gay man, Matthew Shepherd, was beaten and left to die, tied to a fence outside of Laramie, Wyoming. A memorial service was held in Missoula at the Methodist Church. When the Women’s Chorus was called up to the chancel, I joined in:

“We are holding the soul of Matthew in our own two hands.

Though injustice surrounds us, may love prevail.”

I was outed as a singer, a singer in public. I could raise my voice, and be heard.

Epiphanies come in a variety of shapes and sizes and impacts.

Poet Maya Angelou describes an epiphany as “the occurrence when the mind, the

body, the heart, and the soul focus together and see an old thing in a new way.”

Others have described their personal epiphanies as: [from *Epiphany*, Elise Ballard]

“A dramatic, crystal-clear, light-drenched experience”... a feeling “as if elephants had stepped off my chest.” [24]

“Like a key turned in a lock inside [me], and [I was] free.” [134]

Getting unstuck from a paralyzing fear. [4]

Looking through a kaleidoscope that suddenly turned and gave me a “picture of my life [that] looked completely different.” [3]

“An epiphany is an unexpected blessing, gift, insight, or revelation, often of such clarity or profundity that its source feels otherworldly. But it’s all simply a version of, a reaction to, “Wow!” [Heretics, 58]

And what are some of these epiphanies?

“[I] access [my] own power by empowering others.” [201]

“Life isn’t necessarily supposed to be a cakewalk.” [214]

One high-powered manager discovered she was “allergic to [her] life!” Her over-the-top pace and compulsion to “have the ‘perfect’ job and the ‘perfect’ boyfriend and the ‘perfect’ New York City lifestyle,” to travel and go to the best parties and eat at the best restaurants had become simply toxic to her. And she found herself with rashes all over her body, in the hospital, with two needles, dripping everything from steroids to antihistamines into her body. Her epiphany included the lesson to stop and listen to how she felt, to what her mind and heart and body were telling her.

“When [I] support other[s], [I] support [myself]; when [I] harm [an]other, [I] harm [myself]; and when [I] change [myself], a little piece of the world is changed.” [198]

“Love is all that matters. Love is all that [I’m] here for... When [I] lose sight of love, everything goes dark and bleak.” [138]

“[Sometimes I] think [I’m] the lamp shade. [I] forg[et] that [I am] the light – the electricity and the luminosity that lights up every man, woman, and child. The light is who we truly are.” [262]

As our children sang to us:

* I Am A Shining Star. I am loving. See me sparkle. I am love.

You are a shining star. You are loving. I see you sparkle. You are love.

When we shine our light, we can make it bright.

Let's shine love on each and everyone.

Together we illuminate the world with LOVE.

[Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, recently died. His last words: "O wow, O wow, O wow!"]

An epiphany is a sudden realization of a significant truth. At that special moment, a life meaning becomes clear – an insight into our personality, a discovery of something we value or believe in, an acute sense of where we are in life... (Robert U. Akeret with Daniel Klein in ***Family Tales, Family Wisdom***, found in ***100 Ways To Keep Your Soul Alive***)

“Remember,” Rumi tells us, “the entrance door to the sanctuary is inside you... a secret companion musician to dance to. Unique, rhythmic, playful” a companion, “we alone [can] know and hear.”

We must hold the door open, so that all the strands that form our epiphany may waft inside us.

The disciple asks: “Where shall I look for Enlightenment?”

“Here,” says the elder.

But when will it happen, and how will I know it is happening? And what should I look for? What should I look at? And how should I look?

And the elder answers:

You must look. You must be open to looking. You must open yourself up to looking. Nothing will happen if you are looking for something specific.

Look for nothing. Look at everything. Just look.

Look at everything in your life.

Look in the ordinary way, at your ordinary life. Be present at all the happenings in your life.

Don't look elsewhere for enlightenment. Be present to your most extraordinary, ordinary life.

Be here. Stop. Look. Listen. Experience. Appreciate.

In my December newsletter article to you I talked about one of my favorite holiday movies, *Love Actually*. One of the characters – in every sense of the word – in the movie is Billy Mack. Billy is in his mid-50s. He's an old rock & roll singer, an ex-heroin addict, a partier & womanizer. And Billy is trying to make a comeback by winning the annual contest for the best Christmas song. Billy records a cheesy and raunchy version of the old Troggs song “Love Is All Around” – “I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes. Love is all around me, and so the feeling grows.”

Billy has promised, on national television, that if he wins the contest he will play the song in the nude. And he does – play the winning song, wearing only his electric guitar.

And so Billy is invited to the a large number of glamorous parties,” including a bash hosted by Sir Elton John.

Several scenes later we see Billy entering a quiet, modest house – wine bottle in hand.

“I've had an epiphany!” he tells his portly, middle-aged manager.

“I've had an epiphany!”

“So, what was this epiphany?” his manager asks.

“It was about Christmas... I realized Christmas is the time to be with the people you love, and, as dire chance and cock-up would have it, here I am, mid-50s, and without

knowing it, I've spent much of my adult life with a chubby employee. And much as it grieves me to say it, it might be that the people I love is, in fact, you...."

"Well, this is a surprise!" his manager responds. "Ten minutes at Elton John's and you're as gay as a maypole."

But, indeed, Billy has left a party filled with eligible, scantily-clad young women, to be with the person he's spent almost forty years with.

"You turn out to be the f-ing love of my life. And, despite all my complaining, we have had a wonderful run."

A true epiphany – about Christmas, and love, and loyalty, and long-standing relationship.

An epiphany is the manifestation of our true selves, in all our failings and in all our divinity.

An epiphany is the appearance of who we are, and of who we can become.

An epiphany is an insight into the road we should be pursuing.

An epiphany is a spontaneous understanding of what is right and what is wrong in how we are living our lives.

An epiphany is an opening of our eyes to new ways of seeing;
an opening of our ears to more expansive ways of listening;
an accessibility of our minds to new ways of thinking;
a penetration through our bad or sloppy or lazy habits to a more intentional way of living;
an opening of our heart to new ways of feeling.

And so, on this Sunday between Western & Eastern Epiphanies

May we have a beginner's mind – open to all the wonders and possibilities of life.

May we seek and see the sacred in the ordinary.

May we be willing to shed old skin, discard old habits that keep us from a full and joyous life.

May we forget, if only for a brief time, all the things we don't have, all the goals we haven't reached, and focus on all the blessings in our lives.

May we mend the world, not rend the world.

When we come upon that burning bush, may we have the wisdom and patience not to stamp out the fire, but to stand still, to stop and look and listen. Answer "Yes!" to Life & Love.

May we see the door ajar, and have the courage to peek in.