

**Haydenville Congregational Church**

**Matilda Rose Cantwell**

**December 27, 2009**

**“An Epiphany”**

*Luke 1:39-56 and Isaiah 9:2-7/ LUKE 2:42-51*

*May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight O God, our rock and our redeemer.*

There are three Biblical and cosmic realities that converge today, Sunday December 27<sup>th</sup>. They are as follows:

**One, the winter solstice**--the shortest day of the year has come and gone one week ago.

**Two, the church calendar calls today Christmas 2**, the official Sunday that we look in the church at the birth of Jesus to his mother Mary that we have celebrated in our homes. Next Sunday begins the liturgically significant season of Epiphany, when we commemorate the visit of the three kings to the baby born in a barn in Bethlehem as told in the gospel of Matthew.

**And Three**, the scripture reading for today that Richard read to us is the one story found in all of canonized Biblical literature about Jesus as a child. Mathew and Luke tell us one story about the infancy of Jesus—when he is 30 days old and dedicated at the temple. But after that...His childhood, presumably a very important time, is shrouded in silence. The writers of the gospels tell us hardly anything about Jesus until he began his public ministry at about age 30.

One thing all three things have in common is that they produce revolutionary results, yet they happen in relative quiet, chaos or obscurity.

They are transitions that happen over time and space.

These three converging forces meet during this week and invite us into a new liturgical season. They invite us, like Jesus who gets lost in the temple and like the wise men who travel by the light of the star,

To have an epiphany.

The word epiphany, drawn on the original biblical meaning, which is to experience the presence of the divine, as the Magi did, has come to mean

“a revelation” or a "manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something,” “an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure, an intuitive grasp of the truth....”

We think of epiphanies as happening suddenly but in fact, according to the true origins of the world, each is the result of a journey, a transition, of long often-imperceptible processes that finally turn a new direction.

We are in a sort of transition now.

It is still 2009, but most of December is over.

It is the start of a new decade,

But the same political and global and issues persist.

It is not January yet, but the winter solstice has passed.

It is still dark by 5 but if you have the eyes of a meteorologist or a mystic

There is a tiny sliver of light peering over the horizon at dusk,

Beginning to stake out its claim to the territory over which it will have more and more authority as the winter wears on.

Some of you during this week may find yourselves at loose ends.

Packages are unwrapped

The exhaustion of the season may have set in.

You may be returning to work this week, but your heart is not quite in it because you have another long weekend coming up.

With another Christmas come and gone

old sorrows or disappointments may be surfacing

longing for something that was,

Stirrings of things hoped for that never came to pass.

It is the start of the New Year, and now, a new decade.

But this week,

The earth is beginning to turn back towards the sun,

The church turns us to look beyond the waiting and the prophesizing

To the actual birth of Jesus Christ and the mystical visit of three wise men from neighboring kingdoms in the east.

And Jesus is heeding the call of his spirit,

Turning away from what he holds dear, turning towards

His own God.

Each cosmic or legendary event, the solstice,

The incarnation and the journey of the wise men,

And the watershed moment when Jesus enters the temple and speaks and learns there as a separate adult person for the very first time, transpired not because of a sudden flash of light that appeared of its own accord, but as a culmination of long periods of discernment, journeying, and change.

An angel visited Mary but it was she who had to do the work of birth. The wise men saw the star but it was they who had to make the journey. Jesus had two loving parents who brought him up with care and firm limits and religious education, but he also was growing and changing and was called to have his own encounter with God. It is no accident that ages 11 and 12 and 13 are the ages age, after all, of vision quests, coming of age, confirmations, bat mitzvahs, and so on.

So it is with us this season—we are called to be alert to the quiet motion of the universe and amidst the strange chaos of this week between Christmas and New Years—

And through the long and hard won work of the journeys we have been on, Find God through the change that has been brewing quietly in us... Whether we know it or not.

In the scripture we heard today, Jesus; parents Have made the journey back home to Nazareth after celebrating the Passover festival in Jerusalem and upon their return they find he is not with the band of travelers as they thought, and they panic, turning around immediately To look for him.

When they finally find him he is in the temple in deep and fervent studying and reading with religious elders, and in response to their relived but frantic question about where he has been he responds

*Did you not know I was in my father's house?*

He has upset his parents for he has done the first of many leavings that we do as we grow, leaving what is familiar and comfortable. He finds his homeplace in his spiritual life, which has been there all along.

He makes official his relationship with the parent we all have in God, the one who is always unconditional, and never dies.

It is our earthly parents, we hope, that *introduce* us to what is out there to be found. But we must eventually begin to leave home, in one way or another. And we have to get lost once or twice or many time, in order to find God.

I am fond of this particular Bible story for it makes me think of the members of our Haydenville Church youth group who are now all between the ages of 11 and 12. They are not children but not adults, Not yet teenagers but surely not just kids. Some of them are here--. Reilly McQueston, infinitely curious and creative, alive with imagination, dedicated to service and leadership, Denis Odea, brimming with schemes and ideas about how things work, Jon Roberge, characterized by a spiritual faithfulness, sensitivity and loyalty, Will Hathaway, filled with spiritual hunger, religious curiosity, and a wit and wisdom beyond his years.

I am convinced by being with them  
That this is an age filled with tremendous spiritual potential, a time of  
upsurge in passion and curiosity.  
Life for 11 and 12 year olds requires tremendous courage because adults  
don't always quite know how to treat them. And our culture is competitive,  
encourages conformity and tends to squelch the imagination.  
In response to how our culture treats this intensity  
they often retreat into video games, make up,  
And fragile peer groups.  
At this age the prefrontal cortex  
Begins to develop at a unprecedented rate  
Puberty begins, and the world begins to bestow us with adult  
responsibilities. In some countries children Will and Reilly and Jon's age  
Are conscripted as child soldiers, some work long hours in factories, take  
care of whole families of younger siblings.  
This is not an easy time; it can be chaotic and confusing.  
Yet like Jesus, the yearning for truth in 12 year olds is profound.  
It is our responsibility to nurture this chaotic and confused  
And yet powerfully creative drive to know the divine in twelve year olds.  
It is also our responsibility to nurture it in ourselves.

It is an absolute blessing an joy for me to work with these kids  
Because in their very boredom is potential  
In their restlessness is hope.  
They remind me of Jesus in the temple—rebellious and determined  
Yet in need of the unconditional love and gentle discipline that Mary  
provides her son  
When she says, in effect, *what in Gods name did you think you were doing,  
we were worried sick.*

This week, this day, we are all in some ways at the equivalent crossroads.  
We have all been 12 once  
We are all, metaphorically speaking, 12 again.  
We are at the crux, the convergence of these major facts, the incarnation, the return of the light, the New Year.  
Our Christmas 2009 is now over, the new light is not yet visible.  
We may feel bored or restless or let down or like we want to get away.  
We may want to retreat to video games or the habits we developed in the stress of the holidays.  
we may want to binge on food or alcohol or the computer, because New Years, when we resolve to change, is just a few days away—why not live it up until then?  
We may want to conform ourselves to a peer group that makes us feel secure but leaves us empty.  
But Jesus did not allow himself to be numbed by cultural pressure or what was easy--  
Nor was he under the illusion that what he did would be met with praise.  
Though upon his return he called upon his parent's knowing of him, called upon them to recognize his passion, saying,  
*"Why were you searching for me?"*  
Jesus went away and got lost, but he found God.

After chastizing Jesus for the scare he created, Mary and Joseph calm down, things go back to normal, and Mary, according to the scripture  
"treasured all these things in her heart."

Perhaps Mary, though stung and a bit traumatized by this incident, scared by this preview of how Jesus would leave the world of domesticity and put himself of harms way--  
saw through it to the magnificence of who Jesus was becoming.  
Perhaps she saw how if we follow the restless calls of our hearts in these in between times,  
We come upon great truth. We come closer to our true selves, we have an Epiphany.  
What more could we want for our children, or ourselves.

So now, at this convergence of strange cosmic forces, where are we?  
Clinging to what is easy or ready to travel forward  
Into unknown but longed for territory  
Even if it means

Getting in a little trouble  
With someone we love or with ourselves.  
Even if it means rebelling  
From our daily routine or habitual way of being.  
The solstice, the incarnation, the epiphany season, the growth of Jesus  
Are all ignited by the a motion of the the iniverse, motion of the spirit  
A courageous stirring of the heart.  
Soemtimes the most unchartered territory  
is the one right in the midst of own souls.

The incarnation and the ressurection didn't happen by themselves.  
Go does not speak to us unless in our own irreverant seemingly haphazared  
way unless a part of us has been has been listening  
for a long, long time.  
By the same token, the universe does not shift without our help,  
Jesus is not born unless we are ready to be his midwives.

Friends, let us not make New Year's resoltions to be other than who we are  
but instead look deeply into our lives where we are *already* in the midst of  
the chaos and mess and uncertianty of an epiphany.  
to where we are getting lost in order to be found.  
Where our transitons call out for courage, our fear for prayer and study.

Take to heart these words of poet Rilke, about the epiphany that is always  
brewing, deep within...  
*driven by your senses dare  
to go to the edge of longing  
grow like a fire,s shaowcasting glare...let it all happen to you...  
beauty and dread. Simply go--  
no feeling is too much...  
...near here is the land they call life  
you'll know when you arrive  
by how real it is  
give me your hand.*

***Amen.***