

“The Detour and the Discovery: A Sermon on Epiphany”

It is Sunday, January 22nd,
The snow has finally begun to fly,
The Patriots are still with us (go Pats!)
and for those of us who made resolutions for the new year (a show of hands?),
now is the time, three weeks into the new year, when its worth asking:
how's it going?
How goes that new way of eating healthy and exercising?
Are you keeping your promise to be less irritable?
Are you working less hours?
Are you getting out instead of staying home?
Have you picked up that instrument yet, and have you begun lessons?
Nathan, are you keeping your promise to finish sermons on Friday
And not have them spill into family time on Saturday?
Well, until yesterday I did.

Into these questions arrives the holiday of Epiphany,
that most uncelebrated of days in the West,
but in the East is a big deal for the way it marks the moment the three wise men
arrived at the stable after a long journey and had an epiphany
that this little baby was
touched by the divine.
On Wednesday of this past week thousands of Russians cut cross-shaped
Holes into the ice of Mana River, in Siberia,
And celebrated Epiphany with a midnight immersion into the water,
The outside air temperature a cool Minus 32 degrees (Celsius)
As they stripped down into their swimming suits and jumped in to the river
With the priest at the edge, egging them on.
Think of them next time you say our UU religion and our church
asks too much of you.
It could be worse.

We begin with language first, because you know how I love language.

Anyone know what language the word 'epiphany' comes from?

Greek.

And anyone know what it means in the Greek?

To appear, to take the cover off,

To show forth, to bring forth a new manifestation.

Converted into questions, epiphany asks:

What is showing forth for me?

Will I, like the wise men, be led to a new place?

What is about to appear?

Will I see something?

Will I hear something?

Will I, as Mary Oliver says in our poem, describing epiphany,

Finally know what I have to do?

Will I finally learn what I have to learn?

When I think of these questions,

And as I have thought about epiphany this week,

I will confess I haven't been thinking of wise men and baby Jesus

And stars in the East and long, desert journeys.

Like many of you I was here Christmas Eve; been there, done that.

Instead, I have been remembering a journey through steep trails winding through

Missouri Ozark mountains,

I have been smelling the sweet exhaust from two-stroke

Motorcycle engines,

I have been transported back in time to an early June day

When I was 15 years-old,

And I have been thinking of my dad.

Some fathers take their sons to ball games.

Some throw footballs on the street.

Some take you fishing.

My dad did some of all these things,
But the main thing he did was take me
Deep into the Missouri woods most every weekend
From the time I was twelve until I left for college to ride off-road motorcycles.
So, in place of this robe imagine me in full-face helmet,
Yellow jersey and racing pants that matched
Our yellow bikes, blue lightning boots that went up to nearly
My knee, black-tinted goggles.
Sunday mornings for me weren't often spent in church.
They were spent speeding through trails, up and down rocky hills,
And over dusty, forgotten country roads.
R..W Emerson and Thoreau
Asked us to walk the hills to get in touch with God;
I rode through them at 40 miles an hour.
Do I get partial-transcendentalist credit?

There is one kind of epiphany that usually strikes most of us
In reference to our parents at the age of around 14/15.
Do you know it is?
It is not necessarily correct or true, but it is the epiphany
We have that we are much more wise than our parents.
This is the "*at 14 I thought my father was ignorant*"
Half of the Mark Twain quote I put for us at the top of our
Orders of service.

The quote describes how I felt about my dad in that summer of 1986
When, on a Sunday morning,
We found ourselves on a trail called the 'Pipeline,'
So-named after the pipe that ran alongside the trail carrying
I don't what deep into that beautiful, wild, far-from-home countryside.
Riding behind him, I remember still stewing over the argument we
Had the night before about my girlfriend,
How he wouldn't let me see her for the seventh day in a row

because I had one night, just one night, where I broke curfew.

Watching his shoulders dip with the bike into the corners,
his wheels bouncing over the roots,
His helmet glinting off the sun and the shadows,
I was convinced he didn't know a thing, not a thing,
About what it meant to love a girl, to stay out too late
(by accident – my watch broke!),
To be young, to be free.

He confirmed his 'old-ness' by slowing down ahead of me,
And looking for a chance to demonstrate my independence
I pinned the throttle back and rocketed past him,
A metaphor for how I was feeling.
Eat my dust, dad!
What I didn't realize, what most of us don't realize about our parents,
Is that they see things we don't,
Because they have had epiphanies of their own over the years,
Including the one that teaches you to look closely for those arrows
Nailed to a tree that scream DETOUR!
To the motorcyclists riding past,
The arrow that I, in my 15 year-old blind confidence, didn't see.

Too late.

There was the trunk of a fallen tree across the trail,
And though I was able to get the front wheel up and over,
Because I had been practicing my wheelies,
The rear wheel slammed in hard, pitching me off into the woods,
My bike, the bike I cut hundreds of lawns over three summers to help pay for,
Halted dead still.

"Nate! I hear my dad yelling. Nate!"

"I'm okay, I'm okay" I say, rubbing my elbow, rubbing my bruised ego.

The bike, however, is not so lucky.
The back wheel is broken, the bearings shot,
And with a growing sense of foreboding we realize
That the only way that both of us will get out of those woods
Is if we leave my prized machine behind
And I ride out with my dad on the back of his bike,
My arms around his waist and on his shoulders
Like I last did when I was five.
"I'll come back tomorrow with tools and a friend,"
He assures me. *"It will be ok."*

Which it mostly was, until we discovered how the detour
Led us to another detour led us to another detour,
And before too long we realized we were lost,
no star in east to guide us through this Ozark desert,
no wise men in those woods.

Have you ever seen your parent scared?
Until my dad slowed to a stop and took his goggles
Off to wipe the sweat from his eyes I had not,
another epiphany gained on this summer detour:
That our parents worry just like their children do,
Indeed even more, sometimes so much more,
Because of how much they love us.

"Are we going to be ok?" I ask in fear, in hope.
"Yes," he says.
And then he kicks the engine back to life and we're off,
This man who only the day before
Was in my eyes foolish and judgmental and ignorant
Now is my guide, my star, my wise man who I pray will lead us home.

We journey for hours; the gasoline in the tank getting low.

The sun, despite being early summer, is high and hot;
we speak not many words.
And then we see it – in the distance, power lines.
And in the Ozarks where there are power lines there are roads,
And where there are roads there is the way home.

It would make for a good story, maybe more Hallmark,
If I told you that when we pulled into the parking lot late
That afternoon we were sobered enough by our experience
To admit how scared both of us were,
and how much we needed each other to carry us through that fear.
But between parents and children,
and maybe between fathers and their sons in particular,
an epiphany like this takes years to unfold.

The next day, after a sleepless night,
my dad took the day off from work and went back into those woods
with his friend Chris, in the pouring rain,
to retrieve my bike.
I went to school, I went through the motions,
And when the day was over I came home as fast as I could,
Waiting there by the front door for him to come home.
And when I saw his car and the trailer pull up outside with both bikes
Fastened down,
I ran to him and told him how I relieved I was
that my motorcycle was back safe and home.
“Thank you,” I said, quietly, breathlessly. *“Thank you.”*

But what I couldn't say, because I was 15,
Was the epiphany I had at that moment
that I wasn't really waiting for the bike at all;
What I was waiting for, in fact, was him;
What I was so relieved to see, in fact, was my dad safe and home.

“Thank you,” I said that night in my prayers, quietly, breathlessly.

Thank you.

Sharing small, private epiphanies like this give permission,

I believe, for us to not keep our discoveries to ourselves.

What stories from your past still have something to teach you?

What is appearing as you look into your past?

What do you see? What do you hear?

What are you learning?

From my life to your life,

And your life to other lives,

May the epiphanies we make along the way

Bless us and bless the people we love.

It is January, 2012. Welcome to another year.

Welcome to another calendar of discoveries and detours,

Of Roadblocks and little redemptions.

Welcome to your journey.

Amen.