

Overwhelmed with Joy
Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany Sunday
January 5, 2025
Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

On December 16, 2005, the greatest Christmas movie of all time was released. The film stars Diane Keaton, Craig T. Nelson, Luke Wilson, Dermot Mulroney, Claire Danes, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Rachel McAdams. And if you're thinking to yourself, "Wow. What is this movie? I've never heard of it." Then I have good news for you! Epiphany is technically tomorrow, so it is still Christmas, which means you can go home and watch it today.

The Family Stone tells the story of a family Christmas gathering when the eldest son, Everett, brings home his new girlfriend, Meredith played by Sarah Jessica Parker, with the intent to ask his mother for her mother's ring to propose on Christmas morning. The Stone family does not think Meredith is right for Everett, and they express this at multiple points. And to be fair, Meredith very obviously does not fit in with the family. In multiple informal family conferences, Diane Keaton's Sybill, the matriarch, remarks that she just knows Everett has come to ask her for the ring. One of the younger brothers, Ben, remarks that Everett can't marry Meredith because, "they don't even love each other."

The Stone Family is far from perfect, but they deeply love each other. Even when they are being mean to Sarah Jessica Parker's Meredith, you can't help but want to be a part of their family. While all of the humor and conflict over Everett and Meredith's relationship is happening throughout the film, the viewer also learns that Sybill has been diagnosed with some form of advanced cancer. This is not the first time she has had cancer, but this time it's really bad.

None of the five adult children know about their mom's diagnosis when they arrive home for Christmas, and their parents have no intention of telling them until after the holiday. They want to enjoy the holiday together and not have this news hanging over the family. But, even though their parents try to keep it from them, you see as each of the children realize what is happening. Though nothing is said directly to them, they each know and have their own moment with one of their parents as they learn the truth.

The oldest daughter, Susannah, realizes it when she asks where mom is, and her brother-in-law says she is taking a nap, and the look they exchange confirms Susannah's fears. She goes up to her parents' room and lays next to her mother on the bed resting her hand on her mother's shoulder. Diane Keaton turns over and cups her daughter's face in her hand and they weep together. The middle son, Ben played by Luke Wilson, asks his father out right when they are spending some time together one-on-one, saying, "It's worse this time isn't?" Craig T. Nelson's Kelly, feigns ignorance and says, "is what worse?" Ben says, "Mom, Dad." When Kelly confirms it and says they didn't want to tell the kids until after Christmas, Ben breaks down weeping and Kelly pulls him close and holds him.

In their gut, each of the kids new something was off. Something in the air wasn't right, and somehow they just knew. But what struck me in my (so far) four viewings this season, was the abundance of joy in the film despite the grief being held that this is likely the last Christmas they will have with their mom.

Sybill and Patrick (one of her sons-in-law) take the time to watch the snow fall together in joy and wonder. Ben enjoys a night with Meredith where she finally lets her hair down, dancing and singing to her favorite song. Everett connects with Meredith's sister, Julie, and finds deep joy in the story of an artist in Alaska who builds a sculpture for his community. At the end of Christmas day, nothing has really gone according to plan, and the family is still sitting in the reality that it will be their last Christmas with their mother. Ben and Meredith are together, silently reflecting on everything that has happened, and Meredith begins to sing a few bars of "Joy to the World." She sings, "while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, repeat the sounding joy. Repeat the sounding joy..." tapering off and humming the rest. Ben says to himself, "repeat the sounding joy," realizing that joy has found its way in even in the midst of the grief. Even though nothing has gone the way it was supposed to that day, they were joyful anyway.

The magi knew something wasn't right with Herod. We are told that they were told in a dream to go home by another way, but I imagine they knew something was off. When Herod called them back getting very specific about the star they were following, and then asking them to report back where they found Jesus, I wonder if something shifted in their gut. I wonder if they got a feeling that coming back to Herod was the worst possible decision they could make. They had to have known that they might be in grave danger. They must have been playing out the different scenarios of what might happen to them on their journey.

But then that star stopped, that star stopped and they knew they had found what they had been seeking. They had finally found the Christ-child and they were overwhelmed with joy. They were overwhelmed with joy just because they found a toddler sitting with his mom. Jesus doesn't do anything of note in this story. He doesn't miraculously speak some word of blessing to the magi. He is just as normal as a toddler who is fully God and fully human can be—sitting with his mother. Jesus' mere existence caused the magi to be overwhelmed with joy.

Or maybe I should say they let Jesus' mere existence overwhelm them with joy. Despite the danger they might be facing, despite all of the what-ifs running through their heads, despite the fear and anxiety that might have been boiling inside them, despite the fact that the gifts they brought weren't the most toddler-friendly, the magi let themselves be overwhelmed with joy. They let the magic of the moment wash over them, when they could have resisted. They could have not let themselves fully embrace the magical joy of the moment, but they did. They were joyful anyway.

The story of the magi can be pretty fantastical. I mean a star that moves through the sky to guide them stopping right over where Jesus is, seems unlikely. And, many have tried to explain the stars erratic behavior away. But, what if we let ourselves believe in it? What if we let

ourselves believe in the magic and miracle that a star led three magi to the Christ-child? What if we let ourselves believe that the Christ-child the magi searched for and found really does change everything? I can be as pessimistic sometimes—skeptical about magic and miracles. And Lord knows we progressive types often try to rationalize stories of miracles and the supernatural in the Bible. But what if today we didn't? What if we let ourselves believe in it? What if this Epiphany we follow the example of the magi and let ourselves be overwhelmed with joy and wonder and magic? Because, magic and miracles and joy are truly all around us.

I'll leave you all with a meditation from Howard Thurman called, "Magic all Around Us."

I seek new levels of awareness

of the meaning of the commonplace.

It is easy for me to take things for granted and to deal with them without sensitiveness.

When have you noticed the color in the sky?

When have you looked at the shape and place of a tree?

What about the light in the eyes of your friend when [they smile]? The gracious manner that your child has in meeting people at the door?

The moving insight and the power of the words of a hymn, the music of which you enjoy?

The renewal of mind and body after a night of restful sleep? The way the cut in your finger healed, leaving scarcely a trace of the opening?

The spontaneous response which overcomes you when you are face to face with some poignant human need?

The times when deep within your heart you whisper a thank you to Life, to God or, as you may say, to the Fates!

There's magic all around us.

In the rocks and trees, and in the minds of [humans],

Deep hidden springs of magic.

[The one] who strikes the rock aright, may find them where [they] will.

I seek new levels of awareness

of the meaning of the commonplace.

The world is a tough place to be right now. There is so much pain and violence and grief. Many of us have so much fear and anxiety about what is to come this year with the incoming presidential administration. But, God is at work. There is magic and wonder and beauty and joy all around us. Embracing magic, wonder, beauty, and joy is a radical act of resistance. So my friends, let yourselves be overwhelmed with joy anyway.