

Running with passion and pleasure.

The season of Christmas is now officially behind us, and today we are observing the Feast of the Epiphany. But I have to make a confession to you: even though the Feast of the Epiphany is one of the more significant days on our church calendar (which, incidentally, we will have on sale, for \$3, after this service), I'm having a very hard time generating even the smallest amount of excitement about it. And I think part of my problem is the fact that I'm coming down from all of the excitement and busyness of Christmas. All of the great worship services are behind us. The colorful lights and yard decorations are disappearing. You can't find Christmas carols on the radio to save your life. And, well, life just seems to be getting back to its normal (dare I say, dull?) routine.

These are the days when I wish I could be more like my dog, Jack. Jack is a one-year-old Welsh Terrier. Now, if you've ever been to my house, then you know that I have a really good-sized back yard. And Jack knows that the back yard serves two purposes: business, and pleasure. And it's often the case that, when Jack has finished his business, he wants to play. Sometimes he'll wrangle one of us to play fetch with him. (Usually, he's the one that fetches.) Sometimes he plays tug-o-war with a rope swing we have hanging from a stout tree limb. But, sometimes, all that Jack wants to do is run. And there's no forewarning. One minute, he's standing very still sniffing at the breeze, and the next minutes he's running like a mad dog, as fast as his little legs will carry him, around the perimeter of the back yard. And he may do two or three circuits of our back yard before he's finished.

Last evening I was watching one of Jack's races around our back yard, and I thought it was interesting how he made even running hard look fun. And then I remembered the old movie *Chariots of Fire*. It's a film based on the true story of two British track athletes who compete in the 1924 Olympics. One of those athletes was Eric Liddell (sounds like "fiddle"), a child of missionaries, and a devout Christian. But he was also a great runner. As I was watching Jack, on either his second or third pass around the yard, I remembered one of my favorite parts of the movie. In one scene, when members of Liddell's family were questioning his decision to spend so much time training for the Olympics, rather than preparing himself for the missionary field, Liddell said to them: "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." And as I watched my dog Jack once again successfully navigate the fourth turn and begin his sprint across the patio, I could see that he was doing what dogs love to do. And I could almost imagine that, in the process, he was feeling God's pleasure.

And in that moment, I realized that what I needed was to figure out how to make the transition from Christmas to Epiphany and the rest of the year, and still maintain that sense and awareness of God's presence and pleasure in my life. As it turns out, I'm not the first person to face this problem. Men and women of faith have long known that one of the hardest transitions for a Christian to make is that from Incarnation to Epiphany; from God being found in a baby

born in Bethlehem, to God being recognized in the life anticlimactic actions of a young man from Nazareth. And in our own lives, it's the transition *from* hearing about God, and celebrating the birth of his son, and perhaps even embracing God in some new way, *to* the more mundane task of so ordering our lives that we allow the fingerprints of God to be seen through them.

I recall hearing one person describe the difficulty of this transition. He compared it to going from watching the Kansas City *Chiefs* playing in the Super Bowl (hypothetically speaking!) to watching the Miami *Dolphins* battle the New York *Giants* in London. In other words, it's a bit anti-climatic.

So, how do we do it? How can we get to a place where we care about the Epiphany, and all that follows it? How can we recapture that sense of passion, and God's pleasure? Well, I imagine that most of us can still remember something of our teenage years. And maybe we can even remember the fear and excitement of our first romantic relationship. Maybe we can remember holding hands for the first time. Or the anxiety we felt while trying to call that certain someone on the phone. Or the thrill of the first kiss. That whole process, of going from hoping and wishing to dating and courting, was, for most of us, wonderful and terrifying at the same time.

Well, I think that the idea of the Incarnation – that whole notion of God coming to us as one of us – is also both wonderful and terrifying. The thought of God entering this world in the form of a little baby, is one that grabs your attention, it draws you in for a closer look, and then invites you to become more deeply involved. And just as many of our teenage infatuations did not make sense, neither does the Incarnation.

Well, if dating and courting is a good analogy for the Incarnation, then I think that marriage is a good analogy for the Epiphany. Because the Epiphany is not merely an idea, a wish, a hoping for. It's an encounter. It's an experience of the reality of God. In the Epiphany, we come face to face with the same burning bush that Moses saw. And we hear the same "still, small voice" that Elijah heard. And we see the same baby lying in a manger that the shepherds saw. And, on our own roads to Emmaus, we encounter the same risen Lord which the disciples met.

And these encounters can be so powerful that our whole world view, and perhaps even our very identity, is changed. Like the encounters we have in marriage, when we encounter the Epiphany of God, we find ourselves willing to commit all of our lives to that other person. We bring all of our wisdom, and our allegiance to the truth, into that relationship. And we freely promise loyalty and fidelity to that other person forever. In other words, our partnership with God is like our partnership in marriage. It's "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health." For ever. And in that encounter, we become part of God's creative plan, creating families and communities, and a new quality of life.

Each year, on the Feast of the Epiphany, we hear the same gospel lesson. We hear the story of how Wise Men from the East traveled great distances to see a young couple and their

newborn son. And what those Wise Men encountered wasn't merely an idea, but Truth. They encountered the Truth about life. And the Truth about death. But especially the Truth about God. They encountered the mystery of God-the-Creator in the person of God-the-Son. And there was no doubt in their minds what they had found.

In the end, I'm convinced that we still need the Feast of the Epiphany. Because when we get caught up in the routine and mundane stuff of life, we need something which will grab our attention, and spark our imagination, and invite us into something new. We need that very same thing which drew the Wise Men, and John the Baptist, and the Disciples, and the countless saints and martyrs, to carry on the work of Christ. We need, and desire, that relationship that not only promises all that we need, but also demands all we have to offer. A relationship, in other words, of pure, unbounded love.

And so, today, we make the transition from Christmas to Epiphany. From promise to fulfillment. From courtship to marriage. It's a transition from knowing about God, to walking with God. From being filled with the love of God, to sharing that love with others. But as good as all this may sound, it is still, for many people, a very hard transition. So, I would like to close with another quote from that great British runner, Eric Liddell. He was speaking, as I recall, to a group of fans, following a race that he had won:

You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race. It's hard. It requires concentration of will, energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape – especially if you've got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe your dinner's burnt. Maybe you haven't got a job. So who am I to say, "Believe, have faith," in the face of life's realities? I would like to give you something more permanent, but I can only point the way. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in her own way, or his own way. And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, "Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me." If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race.

And when I go home this afternoon, I'm going to give Jack a couple of extra biscuits, for helping me write this sermon. Amen.