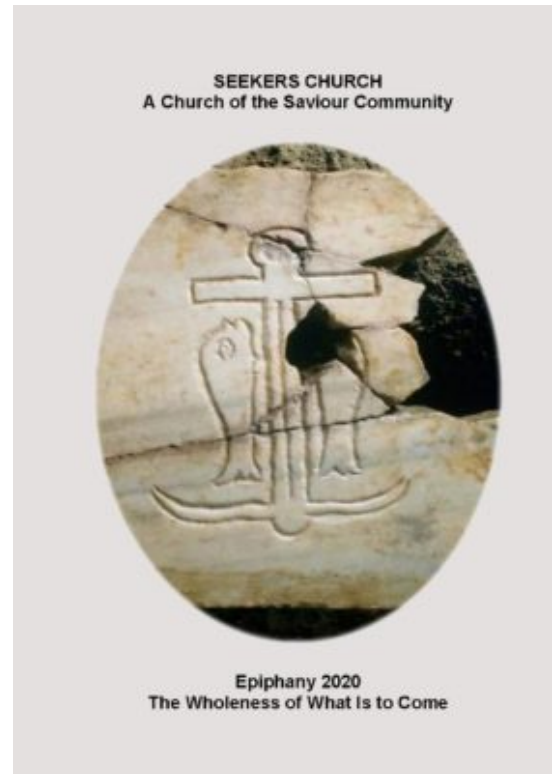


# “Epiphanies Everywhere” by Kolya Braun-Greiner



*Fish and anchor  
inscription  
from catacomb of St  
Priscilla (Rome)*

**January 5, 2020**

## **Epiphany [observed]**

We celebrate Epiphany today, the 12th day of Christmas commemorating when Magi, wise ones or astrologers “observed the star and came in search of the child to worship him.” There is no common agreement as to the true meaning of the Magi – suffice it to say they had a deep wisdom that discerned this sign of the cosmos, the star, as a sign that Christ had become incarnate in the world in the birth of Jesus. The occasion of their arrival and inquiries around Jerusalem were

so spiritually and politically threatening that Herod gathered all spiritual leaders of the city to interrogate them about the place foretold of Christ's birth. He then connived a way to discover the exact location of the Christ child by directing the wise ones to inform him where they found the baby.

I want to focus on the Magi's capacity for discerning the signs of the natural world as epiphanies of a spiritual reality that offers a model for a kind of spiritual practice as we move in the world.

Epiphanies can be harbingers of news that is either frightening and full of doom or inspiring and full of hope, depending on your perspective.

I now venture into trying to define what is probably indefinable. What exactly is an epiphany? (Greek: epiphanea, "manifestation, striking appearance") is an experience of a sudden and striking realization. It may describe scientific breakthrough, religious or philosophical discoveries. An epiphany may occur as an enlightening realization which allows a situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective. Epiphanies are studied by psychologists and other scholars, particularly those attempting to study the process of innovation. Often they are triggered by a new and key piece of information, but importantly, a depth of prior knowledge is required to allow the leap of understanding. I'm convinced that because the Magi had a depth of spiritual wisdom, they were able to perceive the message that the cosmos was delivering.

What we see or perceive is determined by how we see. I am a visual learner who catches glimpses of things on the edges of peripheral perception. I admit that this ability was cultivated at an early age by vigilant scanning of the chaotic and unpredictable dynamics of my addictive family. Allow me to digress for a moment about peripheral vision which is an

evolutionary inheritance of an ancient capacity and regrettably, a skill lost without practice in a world becoming increasingly myopic and narrowly focused – , both figuratively in lack of tolerance for diverse perspectives and literally as the periphery of things beyond the visual confines of a phone screen become increasingly less attended to. When I told Marjory Bankson of my frequent experience of spotting hawks out of the corner of my eye she shared with me something that the wise spiritual artist Meinrad Craighead said: “Look out of the corners of your eyes. Watch the edges.” Marjory, being an accomplished potter had been accustomed to viewing things from the center outward – from the perspective of the potter’s wheel!

I’ve found that spiritual meaning can be discovered on the edges of things and I dare say that at the margins we may experience the Christ Mystery most profoundly. The direction of our gaze whether it be heavenward or toward the earth can offer epiphanies to us. We might practice the ways of seeing and experiencing the world as mystic Meister Eckhart described: “The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God’s eye are one eye, one seeing, one love.”

All that is by way of introduction to my sharing what I am humbly bold to call epiphanies of God’s presence that I experience in the natural world. How might our eye be trained in the direction of God’s eye to the epiphanies from the natural world that are communicating messages of God’s Word to us?

Spoiler alert – Today’s sermon is a blending of my own call with an answer to Celebration Circle’s invitation to share about the Mission Groups and mine is Earth & Spirit. So I will be weaving in what my mission group holds as its center guiding principles alongside how my personal experience dovetails with that of the Earth & Spirit Mission group.

The roots of my epiphanies began in the fields and forest of my childhood home in rural Michigan. It was there that I experienced awe, wonder, and reverence in my fascination with the beauty of the natural world. I now listen for and observe God's voice most clearly and powerfully when I am walking beside a stream or gazing at the trees, or listening to birdsong. I invite you to take a moment today or this week, take some moments in nature to experience something of the presence of God. May it be a resource to you that is freely offered by Creation every day. This practice is one of the spiritual practices held in common by members of my beloved mission group Earth & Spirit.

Over course of several months last year Earth & Spirit crafted these words to describe our mission of yearning to discover God's word for us in the natural world:

The Earth & Spirit Mission Group is called to support deeper spiritual connection with God through experience with the natural world. We are called to be awake and appreciate the world God has created, responding with gratitude and awe for nature's beauty, diversity and wildness.

We are called to reflect on, act for, and experience nature through both individual engagement and corporate mission:

- We experience what God has to teach us through direct communion with nature.
- We recognize our interdependence with the whole web of life.
- We acknowledge pain over our broken relationship with nature and joy in its ongoing rejuvenation.

Our full mission statement can be read on the Seekers website.

In recent years I've become increasingly inspired by the capacity of what our mystical and even strains of the orthodox tradition understood as the first book of scriptures – God's miraculous Creation, the Book of Nature.

In his book *The Universal Christ*, about which Glenn Clark and I will be leading a class for the School for Christian Growth next month, Richard Rohr attests that this understanding of the Christ Mystery is one that connects our souls with the whole universe of Creation. Based upon the mystical and monastic traditions of Christianity Rohr posits that Christ has become incarnate three times, first in the flaring forth of Creation as the first Word made flesh. Then about 13 billion years later the Christ Mystery became incarnate in the birth and life of Jesus.

And finally the third incarnation is the ever evolving manifestation and consciousness expressed by the body of Christ, the community of followers of Jesus the Christ.

The astrologers heard the call of this mystery through watching the stars, glimmers of light, heavenly bodies the movements of which were read as signs and signals foretelling of things unfolding on earth.

In this vein you are also invited to make time to contemplate the two great books of God's Word: nature and the scriptures. In these words attributed to Martin Luther: "God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars." Listening for the Word of God in the natural world can offer guidance sustain us, and inform our action.

Earth & Spirit offered an opportunity to do just that during a "First Day Hike" on New Year's Day in Rock Creek Park. We were blessed with a beautiful morning radiant with sunlight and 14 people of all ages from Seekers! Folks were invited to engage in some spiritual practices as they experienced nature – visio divina, an adaptation of lectio divina, through our seeing we discover the divine in nature or examine – where do we experience God's presence or need for God's healing in the natural world? Our mission group looks forward to more of these kinds of opportunities for Seekers community to deepen

our soul connection with God's Creation and the epiphanies that God may have for us to discover through nature.

Before the mission group formed I had began to realize that own epiphanies experienced in nature, (many of them at Dayspring) were numerous and the nudging of the Spirit led me to conclude that I needed to write them down and begin sharing these stories in hopes of evoking this perceiving capacity I believe is vital for our times. So about 18 months ago I made a commitment to embark on this project by submitting a proposal to the Growing Edge Fund to support my call to write a book of reflections which I am calling *Nature Reveals God's Nature*. Almost every month I meet with my guide, Marjory, after going to Overlook at Dayspring for a couple of days to reflect and write this book which I hope will inspire others into a spiritual practice of experiencing nature as a source of God's Word.

The book is divided into various themes of contemplating Creation – Clouds, Stones, Trees, Water, etc. within which I share some of my spiritual biography and geography. Each theme is joined by embodiment practice and scriptural references with questions for reflection. I'd like to share with you some of a recent theme which emerged during our Seekers Silent retreat this past fall. It was not my intention to write about insects, since I had not any experience I would call an epiphany with bugs, but then God does have a way of insisting on the overlooked being noticed!

I awoke in darkness of the wee morning hours on retreat at Dayspring and upon returning from the bathroom I heard a chirping cricket in the hallway. I went back to bed, but I continued to hear it as I lay in bed. The longer I lay there listening, the more I began to feel as though its persistent chirping was a plaintiff plea for help. Finally I rolled out of bed to investigate. I discovered that its chirping emanated from a doorway to the outdoors. Then I began to think that perhaps it was caught in the doorway somehow and couldn't

escape. So I gingerly opened the door and sure enough, there lay a cricket in the narrow crevice of the door frame. I watched in awe as it crawled to the edge, its dark form hopped out to freedom and disappeared into the night. This experience brought me to tears. My noticing or attending to the “wee small voice” of this creature helped free it from captivity. Such a small, seemingly insignificant act for an insignificant insect and yet there are so many big things that I feel rather helpless to liberate or change – like climate change, or the magnificent oaks dying in Maryland due to climate caused drought, or the Ash Trees turning a ghostly white as the climate induced Emerald Ash Borer kills one tree after the other, or the climate refugees trying to escape the entrapment of unlivable climate conditions caused by our burning fossil fuels, and the 3,000 year old trees burning up in Australia. Why would one attending to one seemingly insignificant creature make any difference?

What small acts is God calling us to do for which God may have monumental motivations?

The hubris of humans to wholesale dismiss any aspect of God’s creation as insignificant seems to be at the heart of what ails our broken relationship with nature. The sad consequence of our hubris is that when we deem anyone or anything as insignificant, we don’t hear their voices. Could our noticing of the suffering of the smallest creatures of the natural world be calling us to be first-responders to the earth’s cries for restoration? Perhaps listening to these cries of Creation is exactly the kind of attention that is called for in the wider world. All of Creation speaks to me. Creation speaks in wisdom beyond words as messages, metaphors and music and stars.

I love the closing line of the Magi epiphany story in which the wise ones keenly perceived “having been warned in a dream.” They not only listened to their dream but they heeded its advice and took action in response to the dream’s

message. They “returned by another way,” a creative unpredictable move! How might exercising and strengthening our perceptive spiritual powers enhance our capacity to listen to and observe the epiphanies of God’s Word? How might reading the book nature to understand and heed its language of signs, teach and guide us to find “another way”? How like the Magi can we respond to signs of our times and to the principalities and powers rooted in an industrial growth system of consumptive life-threatening practices. How can we become spiritually wise, discerning how to “return home” to mother earth by another creative way and find ways of healing our broken relationship with earth and rifts in our human family?

The mystic Howard Thurmond’s word in a recent Inward/Outward post expressed his deep understanding about the value of spiritual perception:

*There must be always remaining in every [person’s] life some place for the singing of angels, some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and by an inherent prerogative, throwing all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness, something that gathers up in itself all the freshets of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright light of penetrating beauty and meaning—then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory.*

As Richard Rohr puts it, the Christ is everywhere in every thing” so epiphanies are everywhere.

Perhaps if we “put on the mind of Christ” and “see what God sees” we may catch glimpses out of the corner of our eye that the earth is shot through with heaven.



