

Peter Bankson: On the Road – Again

Seekers Church: A Christian Community
In the Tradition of the Church of the Saviour

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On the Road – Again

SUMMARY

Epiphany is a time when we may suddenly see what has been right in front of us for a long time. It is a time of unexpected gifts. And, it is a time to be on the road again. Less than a month ago, I received a gift that seemed like the gold of the magi: I was given back my sight. I saw no star in the East after my surgery, but since then the pieces of my work life fit together differently. While I expected and hoped for the new vision, I've been equally amazed by the gift of insight that came along with it. I can finally see what had been right in front of me for a year. Now I know it is time to step off the main road I've been on, onto undeveloped road in the jungle of government liaison for CIS.

SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 60:1-3

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of God has risen upon you. For shadows shall cover the earth, and thick shadow the nations; but God will arise upon you and the glory of God will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and rulers to the brightness of your rising.

Matthew 2:1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." And hearing this, Herod the king was troubled, and all Jerusalem as well; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told Herod, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'

Then Herod summoned the magi secretly, ascertained from them what time the star appeared, and sent them to Bethlehem saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and the star that they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered the child gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Introduction

This Sunday we celebrate Epiphany, marking the coming of the magi to visit the Messiah – the Promised One, the Christ-baby – bringing their adoration, and their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. It was for them a time of surprising insight. When they went to see Herod in Jerusalem, I suspect they expected to find the child there, in the royal nursery.

It must have been a surprising time for Herod as well. Here were these royal messengers, arrived from across the Eastern desert, bearing riches for a new king that he had heard nothing about.

According to the American Standard Dictionary, the word "epiphany" means "a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something; a comprehension or perception of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization." As our worship theme for this season suggests, it's like suddenly being able to see details in the shadows, and know somehow that we are illumined in the shadow of God.

Epiphany is a time when we see, suddenly, for the first time, what has been right in front of us. It is a time of unexpected gifts. And it's a time to be on the road like the magi, searching for the good news. Let's unpack these three points.

First, sometimes we see something that is right in front of us as though for the first time.

The magi were no strangers to epiphany, to the "comprehension of reality by means of a sudden intuitive realization." They had seen a star in the East, which moved in the sky. Strange sight – like a comet that comes suddenly then moves from night to night in an unexpected way. According to legend, a comet portends the coming of a great leader. The magi determined somehow that this star was calling them to a journey through the desert toward the Mediterranean Sea. So they went, expecting to find a newborn prince in the royal nursery.

Less than a month ago, I received a priceless gift: I was given back my sight. On December 16th, when they removed the bandage from my right eye, I could see clearly again from that eye for the first time in four years. When I went to bed that night I could see stars outside our bedroom window. Not only could I see, but also I could see clearly! It's a treasure like gold from the magi, a treasure beyond belief. As I

pondered this gift, it seemed to me a promise that there is more to come for me.

I think my surgery is as close as I've been to a miracle in more than 30 years. That last miracle happened on a bright morning in Duc Pho Vietnam in the spring of 1967. That morning I was walking up Nui Cua, (Crab Mountain in Vietnamese), a hill overlooking the white sand beach of the South China Sea. I was third in line, walking a narrow trail through waist-high brush. The district chief and I were looking for a site for a new refugee camp, a temporary village for some of the 30,000 refugees who had been displaced by the fighting in Duc Pho.

As we walked, my right eye caught the glint of a bit of plastic wrap on the trail under my foot. It didn't look quite right. I froze, reached down, and found – under my foot – a bamboo trigger wrapped in the plastic. The trigger was attached to a battery and a 20-pound artillery shell hidden in the bushes beside the trail. I had stopped a quarter of an inch before closing the circuit and exploding the booby trap.

Through the miracle of noticing something a little bit out of the ordinary, my sight had saved me. That night, back in the comparative safety of the village, writing to Marjory in the quiet midnight watch, I had a clear sense that by all odds I should be dead, and that God must have saved my life for something else. I wondered what that would be.

This Epiphany season I still find myself seeing new things in the shadows, and wondering what's on the road ahead. It reminds me of the passage from *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris that includes our reflection paragraph for this season:

When a place or time seems touched by God, it is an overshadowing, a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans. But even in terrible circumstances and calamities, in matters of life and death, if I sense that I am in the shadow of God, I find light.

I saw no star in the East after my surgery, but I could see stars again, instead of little smudges in the night sky! The morning after that vision of the night sky from bed, I got out of the shower and faced myself in the mirror to shave. I was amazed to see that in addition to removing my cataract and correcting the nearsighted vision I'd had since birth, the surgeon had given me another unexpected gift – a full-blown set of wrinkles, all over my face! I was really surprised to see myself as you have seen me for years.

That was a little epiphany for me all by itself. Suddenly, I looked **To Me** like I might be ready to be an "elder." It set the stage for the deeper work that I've been going through this last month, and helped me get ready for the changes that are ahead. While I expected and hoped for the new vision, I've been equally amazed by the gift of insight that came along with it. **That** has been an unexpected gift this Epiphany for me.

Sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us, until we're given the gift of insight.

Unexpected Gifts.

My second point is that epiphany is a time of unexpected gifts. The first Epiphany was certainly such a time. When they set out from Persia, the magi brought gifts appropriate for delivery to a newborn prince in a royal palace. Imagine their confusion when they arrived in Jerusalem to find that the king knew nothing of this royal birth! There they were, secreted away in the guest wing of the palace, while Herod called together all the priests and scribes of the people to ask them where the new king had been born and who it might be.

When they were directed to Bethlehem, after all the commotion in Jerusalem and the disquiet and thinly veiled threat in Herod's guidance, I'm sure they were suspicious. Then, when they arrived to find Jesus with Mary and Joseph in a barn behind the inn, there must have been some animated discussion:

"What do we do now?" "Is this really why we came to Judah?"
"Have we brought the right things?"

There, in the dark of the stable, was a miraculous light and a holy child. With their senses on alert after the politics of the capital, the peace of the stable must have been a miracle. It was enough to make them see things differently.

During the first week after my cataract was gone, I began to see things differently, too. Colors were bright again, and suddenly there were houses under the trees across the Potomac River from my office. But some of the new seeing was with my "inner eyes." I began to see that, in spite of my belief that growth and change is the one constant in life, I was hanging on to some old images – living out of what I had seen in the past, rather than seeing what is right before my eyes.

At [Communities In Schools](#), we're in an organizational revolution that has been turbulent, and frustrating for all of us. Old ways of being and doing are being abandoned or ignored. New people are bringing their personalities to bear, trying to make sense for themselves, in new ways, out of what had made perfect sense to me in the old way. Everything is in upheaval: good people are leaving in frustration; others are being let go because they do not fit; and new people are coming in who don't have any history or experience with CIS. The atmosphere is heavy, and the rumor mill is in high gear. It reminds me of that image of Jerusalem after the magi arrived.

Since last August I've been faced with the need to change. I was asked by the new CEO to let go of the responsibilities for providing information technology support for the nationwide CIS network. She wanted to have someone different in the position, and I couldn't see why. I thought I'd built a good team. The only reason we hadn't accomplished what we'd planned was that we hadn't been given the resources we needed. But still she wanted me to shift – back to the government

relations work I'd left a year ago. My first response was disbelief, then defense, then depression.

Then came my surgery. Three days after the surgery, while I was sitting in the examining chair at the doctor's office, I had an epiphany. Suddenly I saw my work at CIS from a different perspective. Everything was the same, but it all fit together differently. I experienced a sudden eclipsing of my priorities and plans. It was an unexpected gift that told me I was ready to get moving again.

I'm on the road – again.

Third, in addition to new insights and unexpected gifts, Epiphany is a time to be on the road again. The magi were travelers, who faced a perilous journey home once they had brought their adoration and their gifts. But we don't call them "wise men" for nothing. They saw what the star meant and followed; they saw the confusion in Jerusalem and found the Christ in Bethlehem; and they understood how to get out of town safely and avoid Herod on the road home. For the past three weeks I've been on a steep learning curve rather like the magi as I adapt to my new capability to see differently, both outside and "insight." Sometimes I don't like what I'm seeing, but the new vision is giving me choices I didn't see before.

On the last two days of 1998 I moved out of my corner office and into a "cozy" place near the president's office, where I can be more responsive to his needs. Tomorrow I'll transfer most of my old responsibilities to someone else. This past week I've been outlining what I need to do to build a solid base of public support for the CIS Network, with Congress, state legislatures, the Administration and the governors.

The road I've been on, managing our information technology support, is headed off in a new direction. Let me try an analogy to explain the shift. When I took on the responsibility for information technology at CIS four years

ago I thought we had been treating information like neolithic hunter-gatherers treated food. It was each staff member for him- or herself. We'd look hard for the data we needed, and when we found it, we'd gather as much as we could carry, take it back to the cave and hide it in a file cabinet so we'd have enough to get through the winter. If someone else wanted some information, we'd trade hard, always making sure we didn't reveal our secret "data-patches."

When I started doing information management, I pulled together a team of enthusiastic people from our existing staff. We developed a new strategy, and went into this prehistoric information environment as new, enlightened "knowledge workers." We were ready to build and maintain a "knowledge restaurant," where all our CIS people could come and find the information they needed at any hour of the day or night. In contrast to the hunter-gatherers, we dreamed of building a system where we would take over the gathering and preparing so that our staff in the field could get the information they wanted without having to hunt, gather, store, "cook" or wash data.

By August, we'd been at it for more than a year, and it wasn't working out the way we'd dreamed. It turns out that, when it comes to information, a lot of our people **like** to "cook." Now I can see what I "overlooked" when we developed our strategy for the CIS Network Information Center – that everybody likes to be in the kitchen. My vision for information management at CIS was focused on an old model. It was new for us, but still out of date.

I wanted to get us to the point where the staff in the field were information users, depending on us as a special crew of knowledge workers who kept it all clean and ready, like the staff at the Four Seasons – or McDonald's. The new vision is that everyone will maintain the knowledge base for everyone. That's more like the kitchen in the home of a big family than a restaurant. The unexpected gift, which I now can see, is

that I don't have to manage this "information kitchen" any more.

In this new vision, the "info kitchen" is a place where everyone does a little cooking and a little cleaning up; where everyone knows what we're looking for and how to put new information on the web site. While our skills and interests will be different, there will be a natural integration over time.

If we had a common Seekers kitchen, we might all want Marjory to cook if we're having turkey, but we'd rather have Guy make the salad, or Glen make the sushi, or Carolyn bake the cookies. In a community kitchen like this, it goes without saying that she or he who finishes the milk must buy a new gallon. (In fact, this is how we've learned to handle preaching and teaching here at Seekers.)

If I were going to rewrite this week's Gospel lesson for myself this year, it would say: "And being warned by an insight in the doctor's examining room, he left the high tech road for another, through the jungle of government liaison..." because that's what I will be doing now.

Conclusion

I don't know what happened to the magi after they returned to their country by a different route. Maybe they went back to work, but I doubt it. As open as they were to the presence of God's spirit, I'd guess they were on the road for the rest of their lives.

When I sat in the damp light of a Coleman lantern in the district advisor's living room in Duc Pho on that spring night in 1966, and realized that I was still alive, I did not dream I would be here. The hunger for a Seekers Church was not awake in me, but I was saved then so I can be here now, and share in the journey to which God is calling us.

When I wrote to Marjory that night, wanting to let her know that I was safe without frightening her with what had almost happened, I did not know I would be preaching today, or standing up for troubled children in the halls of Congress. It has been a long road through thick woods, and even though the surgeon just gave me a full set of wrinkles, I'm not home yet. I've come to a place at CIS where an undeveloped two-lane road leads off into the jungle, and I've been invited to start down that track, and make it passable for others as I walk.

Suddenly, there in the doctor's office last month, the pieces fit together differently. I could see what had been right in front of me for a year. And I knew it was time to step off the high tech road onto that undeveloped road in the jungle. Even with all the unknown currents flowing through our public life, I feel like I'm ready to saddle my camel and head down the road. I'll keep my new eyes open for scraps of plastic in the sand.

Epiphany is a time when we may suddenly see what has been right in front of us for a long time. It is a time of unexpected gifts. And, as the beginning of our annual cycle of study and celebration of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ – Epiphany is a time to be on the road again.

Amen.