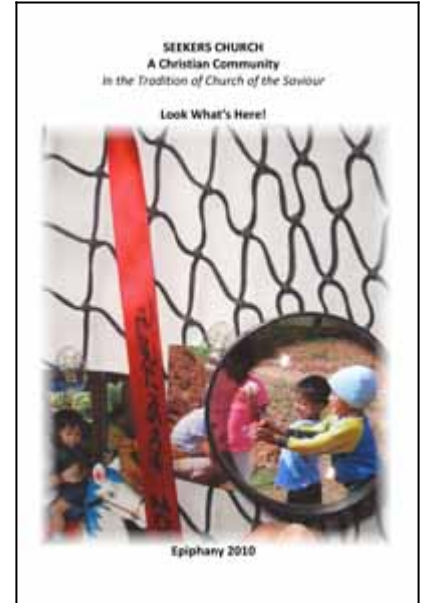


# “Look What’s Here” by Peter Bankson

January 3, 2010



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### SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

### INTRODUCTION

*“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth,*

*and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you." (Isaiah 60:1-2)*

This Wednesday, January 6th, is "Twelfth Night," the day we remember the visit of the Magi to Jesus and his family in Bethlehem. For the Magi, the light came in a very unexpected way. And by the next morning they could see a new way opening before them.

In our front windows downstairs the wise men bearing gifts have moved into the same window as the manger and are marveling at the newborn King of the Jews, the very incarnation of God. What about the Incarnation? What difference does it make? The Incarnation is a journey of death and resurrection, a season of surprises. The good news is hiding close at hand, although it may be hard to see. Look what's here!

#### THE INCARNATION: A JOURNEY OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

The Epiphany we celebrate is a reminder that Jesus' birth has been seen by many as a momentous event, as a turning point in the course of Creation. The Gospel story shows us that those beyond the historically chosen people of God recognized that something important had happened. The Magi, we learn from the tradition, were kings from the East. They might have been Jewish rulers from Yemen, or Babylonian tribal rulers.

As I read the story this year I had an image of the Magi as ancestors of the sheiks of modern Iran or Iraq, men of great power in their culture used to having things their way, men

who were very used to being “right.”

For them, the visit to Jesus was, to say the least, an eye-opening surprise. There they are, in all their oriental court finery, bearing gifts of honor meant to show respect for (or curry favor) with the son of a king and heir-apparent to a throne that might threaten their western border. And after they don't find the child at the royal court in Jerusalem, there's a moment of confusion until they remember that they've been following heavenly guidance – that odd star.

So the star leads them to Bethlehem and a crowded stable behind the Inn. At that point, most well-trained kings with egos large enough to wear a crown would have turned their camels toward the west and headed home. But, these wise leaders had an epiphany! This baby, born in such odd circumstances, really did represent the beginning of something too big to understand ... or ignore.

One thing I see in the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem is this: From the beginning Jesus has been showing the Way. Those who lose their lives will find them ... in some new form. That's what happened to the Magi. They gathered up their gifts and left their castles for a winter pilgrimage. Perhaps they thought they were going to build good relations with the neighboring kingdom, and improve the security of their people. It didn't turn out like they planned. T.S. Eliot says it well in “The Journey of the Magi.”

*“A cold coming we had of it,*

*Just the worst time of year*

*For a journey, and such a long journey:*

*...I should be glad of another death.*

*(read the full poem at  
<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/tseliot/6602>)*

That last line, "I should be glad of another death" calls me back to that core image of the Incarnation: that before we can expect to rise up into some new and wonderful day we will be faced with the painful, sad invitation to let go of what has been, to die to the old so that the new can be born.

In *Learning to Fly* Sam Keene reflects on his experience as a "middle aged" man in trapeze school, learning how to fly. It was the culmination of a lifelong dream for him, an opportunity to push the boundaries of his life as an intellectual college professor.

*His first session includes the all-important practice of learning to let go of the bar and fly into the waiting grip of the catcher. In the beginning he had a really hard time letting go. Reflecting on his reluctance he came to the understanding that while it was not reasonable to let go of the trapeze and fly into the arms of the catcher, "... it is also not reasonable always to be reasonable."* (Learning to Fly, pg. 60)

After learning to fall into the safety net, he began to get the hang of the "rebound," letting the net catapult him into

some new place. As I thought about that line from the poem, “I should be glad of another death” I was led back to Sam Keene reflecting on learning to fall:

*Gradually, I am learning to enjoy the creative possibilities of the rebound. I suppose there are exceptional men and women whose lives are unbroken successes, but for most of us the ascending path is punctuated by times of descent, downfall, and depression. My failures have taught me there is always a second chance. What I have managed to create after falling has often turned out to be better than the trick I planned. Failing gives fallible human beings the chance to start over. This is why every man, woman, and society needs a safety net.*

*(Learning to Fly, pg 114.)*

*It is Jesus who reminds us: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:35)*

For us, living in this world – or “incarnation” – is a journey of death and resurrection, of letting go and reaching out, of endings and new beginnings. And God, who faithfully loves and forgives is the safety net.

## EPIPHANY IS A SEASON OF SURPRISES

This season, as we follow the life of Jesus in our weekly reflections on Scripture, we’re being invited to look for signs of the incarnation in the ordinary structures of our lives. Like those wise rulers from the East who found Jesus in a stable out behind the Bethlehem Inn, we can expect to catch glimpses of the mystery of incarnation in unexpected places.

The dictionary reminds us that an Epiphany is “a spiritual event in which the essence of a given object of manifestation appears to the subject, as in a sudden flash of recognition.” (The American Heritage Dictionary) An epiphany is one of those quintessential “Aha!” moments. Something jumps into our awareness and suddenly we see what’s here in a whole new light. Artists and inventors talk a lot about those “aha” moments as a central part of the creative process.

Forty-nine years ago last week I had one of those epiphanies: I realized, suddenly, that I really wanted to spend the rest of my life with Marjory! It wasn’t carefully planned. It wasn’t what I’d expected. It was just, clearly, the right path. So I proposed that we get married. When she said: “Do you know what you’re asking? I was bold enough to say “Yes,” even though the moment I thought about it I could see that there was more mystery than certainty. I could say “Love is blind,” but I’m coming to see it as a reminder that Epiphany is a season of surprises.

I had another Epiphany moment last Sunday here in this sanctuary. I was on the floor near the back door, sitting close to Eli and Elad, Odelia and Ron’s twin boys, as they scooted around the room. I could see that they were moved by the music, clapping and twirling in time to our singing, clearly comfortable in the presence of 50 folks they’d never seen before. They were passing on to us some of the love their parents are giving to them. All I had to offer was my open arms, and in the moment that was more than enough. I had an epiphany that moment as I listened to Ron speak of his new opportunity to give himself to the efforts to mediate peaceful solutions to the challenges in Lesotho. His sons were already

at work showing us the smiling face of trust, the trust that is an essential ingredient in ending war and violence and discord.

Sometimes I can't see past my expectations to glimpse these little signs of hope. Sometimes I'm so expectant, so hungry for what I've planned and worked hard to achieve that I can't really see the Good News for what it is. The Incarnation is so unexpected it's frightening.

But I'm not alone. Remember all those angels telling folks, beginning with Mary, "Do not be afraid!" It still took them a while to get over the shock. And us? Can we see signs of hope in the unexpected instead of just more evidence of failure?

THE GOOD NEWS IS HIDING CLOSE AT HAND: LOOK WHAT'S HERE!

The prophet Isaiah announces the dawn of a new day, one filled with hope, and joy and justice, a new day sprouting up out of the darkness that covers the earth. It is the promise that better things are here even if we can't quite see them yet.

That reminds me in an odd way of burying the garbage in our back yard. We dig into the dark, wet mud to open a place for the vegetable peels and used coffee grounds, and there on the shovel are those firm crocus bulbs already sending out pale shoots, heading for the light. I'm always surprised by these signs of Spring and replace them as carefully as I can, encouraged by their assurance of brighter, warmer days to come. They are a reminder in the dead of winter that the journey of God's creation is a journey of resurrection, an arc from cold earth into warm air, from sprout to flower to fruit,

from death to life ... again and again.

The story of the Magi is a glorious snapshot of this arc of incarnation at a bright and shining moment, a moment big enough that it's really easy to see the joy and the hope. But that isn't the only moment where we might see the Incarnation. One challenge is that a lot of those bright and shining moments aren't that big. Sometimes we need a magnifying glass to see the hope that is ready to sprout up through the mud. And sometimes, if we don't see those tender green blades, we might not bother to roll away the stone that keeps them in the mud, reaching for some alternate way up into the light.

Another challenge to seeing moments of joy and hope comes from not looking in the right places. We have many interesting, ongoing conversations about call here in Seekers Church. Most of us can see that a good place to find call is where spending your life in service leads to deep satisfaction. But it isn't always easy to get to that intersection. Some of us get so mired in the cold, wet mud of thankless service that we despair of ever feeling any satisfaction, and we turn off the path. Others of us, enlightened by the burnout of our compassionate colleagues, find a place of comfort and joy first and try to expand it so others are included. That's not always easy either, especially when the going gets tough. That's why it's important to have faithful friends who can give you support and a place of accountability as you put up with the galling camels in your life.

I've glimpsed more than a few signs of hope recently. The other day I heard a new story of the importance of the support Judy and Sharon are giving to Kemani, taking him to soccer practice and games so he can be part of a team, giving him the



mentoring and support that are so important.

And last Wednesday I was privileged to be part of the first anniversary celebration of Jake's sobriety. After a tasty dinner, his sponsor John gave thanks for the way Jake has stepped into helping others – coordinating visits to Mark while he's been bed-ridden, developing his "Friend to the Homeless" ministry and helping us find new ways to be in solidarity with those in need.

Cynthia's writing workshops at N Street Village have brought us so many glimpses of hope from women who are homeless. Through poetry they help us glimpse those little epiphanies in the midst of the "very dead of winter."

There's a red ribbon on the prayer net honoring the crew of Seekers who went to Pearlinton Mississippi early last year to help rebuild a home that had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina. I remember the stories of several moments during that trip where service and satisfaction met ... in the mud.

And frankly I can't count the number of glimpses of hope and joy I've seen in the lives of families in the highlands of Chimaltenango where I've been blessed by the opportunity to dig in the mud for hours at a time to help bring a school into the village. As I think about the image from last year's Guatemala pilgrimage of THE (only surviving) village grandfather marvel at the fact that his grandchildren could actually read, I hear Isaiah whispering in my inner ear.

There will be opportunities to look for these signs of joy and hope in this year's visit of our friends from Bokamoso. Roy and Jackie and Leslie have been getting a lot of us ready to help this year's delegation get the most benefit they can from their visit to the U.S., and offer signs of hope to many, many others. Keep your eyes open!

Isaiah tells us: The wait is over: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." It's a call to see with fresh eyes, to recognize what we see, and to share with others the Good News that is being revealed to us.

The good news is hiding close at hand. I'm hoping we can look more closely at life so we can see and highlight the good news that is rising up through the mud, and help it along.

## CONCLUSION

As I look out at us gathering around this table of forgiveness and community I pray that in this new day / year / decade we will dive deep into the dark, messy reality of these days and help raise up the good news that we are on this journey with Jesus. It may be cold and raw out there but we can keep each other company and share each other's burdens as we respond to God's call on us, as individuals and as a family of faith.

Remember:

- *The Incarnation is a journey of death and resurrection.*
- *Epiphany is a season of surprises.*

- *And the Good News is hiding close at hand. Look what's here!*

“Fear Not! The Lord is with you.” Amen.