

Sermon: Rev Susanna Pain
4 January 2009

Epiphany

READING

Matthew 1: 1-12

Epiphany is about the journey; following the star, the intuition, taking risks and keeping on searching until you find what you are looking for.

Along the way don't be afraid to ask questions, to admit you don't have all the answers. (Remain open to the unexpected.)

Keep going ...

and when you find what you are searching for, honour the joy in your heart.

Pay homage and shower it with all the gifts you bring with you, gifts that have always been with you,
then be prepared to return home by another way.

Early one morning in 1999 for no earthly reason, Sara Miles, raised on atheist, wandered into a church, received communion, and found herself transformed – embracing a faith she'd once scorned. A lesbian left-wing journalist who'd covered revolutions around the world, Miles didn't discover a religion that was about angels, or good behaviour or piety: her faith centred on real hunger, real food and real bodies. (*Take This Bread*, Sara Miles, Prologue, p. xiii)

Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled on the church's altar to be given away. She continued to ask questions, to search, but she had found something special. She was fed – and called to use her gifts to feed others.

Within a few years, not only was she and her raggle taggle bunch of volunteers sharing a meal together, then giving away food to hundreds each Friday afternoon in her church (the Episcopal Church of St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco), she had started nearly a dozen other food pantries in the poorest parts of her city.

She mixes with church ladies, millionaires, schizophrenics, bishops and thieves. None is turned away ...

Sara Miles finds Christ and loves him passionately, unexpectedly, and shares this very real food with others.

... This was my first communion. It changed everything.

Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined.

The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people. ...

My new vocation didn't turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays, folding my hands in the pews, and declaring myself "saved". Nor did my volunteer church work mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing them the occasional sandwich from a sanctified distance. ...

And so I became a Christian, claiming a faith that many of my fellow believers want to exclude me from; following a God my unbelieving friends see as archaic superstition. At a time when Christianity in America is popularly represented by ecstatic teen crusaders in suburban megachurches, slick preachers proclaiming the "gospel" of prosperity, and shred political organizers who rail against evolution, gay marriage, and stem-cell research, it's crucial to understand what faith actually means in the lives of people very different from one another. Why would any thinking person become a Christian? How can anyone reconcile the hateful politics of much contemporary Christianity with Jesus' imperative to love? What are the deepest ideas of this contested religion, and what do they mean in real life?

Beyond any single moment of epiphany, my conversion was a long, complicated, and often unconscious journey. When I left the home of my atheist parents, I had no reason to think I was looking for God: I just knew I wanted to experience meaning and connection. ...

But this is my belief: that at the heart of Christianity is a power that continues to speak to and transform us. As I found to my surprise and alarm, it could speak even to me: not in the sappy, Jesus-and-cookies tone of mild-mannered liberal Christianity, or the blustering, blaming hellfire of the religious right. What I heard, and continue to hear, is a voice that can crack religious and political convictions open, that advocates for the least qualified, least official, least likely; that upsets the established order and makes a joke of certainty. It proclaims against reason that the hungry will be fed, that those cast down will be raised up, and that all things, including my own failures, are being made new. It offers food without exception to the worthy and unworthy, the screwed-up and pious, and then commands everyone to do the same. It doesn't promise to solve or erase suffering but to transform it, pledging that by loving one another, even through pain, we will find more life. And it insists that by opening ourselves to strangers, the despised or frightening or unintelligible other, we will see more and more of the holy, since, without exception, all people are one body: God's.

This theology isn't mine alone. It comes from conversation with other believers, tradition, and Scripture; books and prayer and liturgy. It

comes, even more, from my years outside church: from unbelieving and unbelievers, from doubt, from questions that still echo unanswered for me. Faith, for me, isn't an argument, a catechism, a philosophical "proof". It is instead a leans, a way of experiencing life, and a willingness to act.

As the Bible says: Taste and see.

Take This Bread, Sara Miles, Prologue

Once upon a time in a far-off land called Persia, where Iran is today, some people went searching the sky, and seeing a new star appear, began searching for a special child, born to be king.

These wise ones, Magi we'll call them, took provisions, took gifts and followed the star to the unknown.

They knocked on the door of the palace – asking for directions to find this child. Herod was kind, hospitable, smarmy even. He found out the information. 'Bethlehem', he told the, and sent them on their way with instructions to come back when they found what they were looking for.

He was paranoid, this man Herod. He'd already killed his wife, her mother and three sons. He didn't want any competition, any threat to his power. A nasty piece of work, he was. He meant no good.

The Magi continued their search, and found what they were looking for not in a palace, but a humble house. They found a child, and their hearts were filled with joy.

They paid him homage and gave him gifts ... and returned home by a different way, warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

The magi took a risk. There was the risk of inquiry: who knew what they might learn? And the risk of journey: who knew what might happen on their way? And the risk of search: who knew what they might find, or better still, whom they might find?

This short story has captured the imagination of centuries of Christians. Matthew is considered the most Jewish of all the gospels, and yet it is the only one that tells us about the very first Gentiles who worshipped Jesus. God is not mentioned in this story. It is as if God is at work behind the scenes, moving the star, guiding the magi on, but working silently, almost invisibly, only apparent to those who are paying attention.

Matthew seems to see that God is at work like God has been at work in human history before. One of the great stories of Israel's experience with god is the deliverance from Egypt. Like Israel, the child Jesus and his family would go down into Egypt and return again to the promised land.

Later in the story, angels will warn Joseph to flee into Egypt and then to return when Herod is dead. These words echo the words God spoke to Moses telling him to return to Egypt because those who wanted to kill him were dead. Herod's slaughter of the innocent children recalls Pharaoh's slaughter of the Hebrew children.

Jesus is like a new Israel, a new Moses. Matthew understands that God's action in the person of Christ has similarity and continuity with God's saving actions in the past. God's coming in the baby Jesus has God's fingerprints all over it. It's just the sort of thing God would do.

Those who pay attention will see God. William Barclay's commentary on Matthew he says that there are three reactions to Jesus in this story.

The first reaction is that of Herod, the reaction of hatred and hostility. Herod was afraid that Jesus was going to interfere with his life, his power, his plans and so his first instinct was to destroy him. There are those who would gladly destroy Jesus Christ because they see in him the one who interferes with their lives, their plans, their ambitions.

The second reaction is that of the chief priests and scribes, the other wise men. It is the reaction of complete indifference. Jesus' presence did not make the slightest difference to them. They were so engrossed in their Temple ritual and their legal discussions that they completely disregarded Jesus, even though the coming of the Messiah was foretold in the prophets they studied.

And the third reaction was that of the magi, the reaction of adoring worship, to lay at the feet of the Jesus, the noblest gifts they could bring.

Some of us may come to faith like the shepherds. In one great moment, we get a message from God. It comes to us clearly and directly and we respond. It changes our lives and we follow the instructions we receive and never waiver.

Others of us are like the magi. The message that we get from God is not so direct. It isn't the boom of a loudspeaker, but something much quieter, like the shining of a star or a persistent feeling that there is something we need to pay attention to. We are like the searchers, the Magi. We have difficulty with the larger questions of life and faith. We are harassed by modern Herods who throw their power around and abuse others. We wonder about family life, AIDS, violence, illness, cancer, tragedy and death.

The magi didn't have all the answers. Neither do we. But on their life travels, they did have companionship with each other and light of Christ to guide them. And so do we. At the end of their journey, the magi found what they were looking for. And so will we.

Kathy Donley, Bethel Baptist Church, Taylorville, IL USA
<http://www.homiliesbyemail.com/Special/Epiphany/sermon9.html>

In 2005 I had completed my diploma in remedial massage and was working as a massage therapist, and leading retreats and quiet days and Interplay – the dream position! But I was getting cranky – the Australian Church doesn't seem to want to pay for retreats and quiet days. I was feeling marginal and wanting more! I began to do some dreaming, some discerning around the future, searching, following a star, if you like. I spoke with my spiritual director, prayed, wrote in my journal. I imagined a neighbourhood centre, a centre for community where all were welcome, a place of beauty and grace, peace and laughter, where young and old, women and men, people of varying abilities could contribute and support a vibrant, alive community, caring, loving, growing.

I envisaged the importance of ritual-prayer; worship, honouring different stages of people's lives. I imagined the honouring of femininity and masculinity, the body, art, spirituality – a safe place to explore, to be fed, a hospitable space.

I heard Lynda McMinn was leaving Holy Covenant and met with her at Tilley's for coffee. I told her of my dream. She said 'That is what we want for Holy Covenant.' I applied for the job! Two weeks earlier I had told the Bishop I wasn't interested in a parish... Something in my dream followed by conversation with Lynda shifted me.

This was a surprising change. I didn't imagine I would be a parish priest again. I had dreamed the community centre as part of where I was working as a massage therapist, but God had other plans. The star stopped over Holy Covenant. I went via another path and arrived here to find – you, and the Christ child, here in this community.

And three years later, we are walking the path together –

growing in Christ ...

We have the Rainbow Community Centre – when some could only see a house – now vibrant and active, used every day by church and community groups.

We are working to make this site a place of rest, and beauty accessible to all.

We are planning a new building to enhance our ability to serve.

We are well on the way to starting a spirituality centre – for spiritual direction, retreats and quiet days and courses.

We are about to hire a children and family worker, a parish nurse to coordinate a holistic care service for those isolated in this community.

We are growing in our relationship with God and each other, and opening ourselves to God in this community –

being present at:

- Canberra High School
- Calvary
- Radford
- University of Canberra
- Macquarie and Aranda Primary Schools
- Amity
- Ricardo's ... and more.

The journey continues and takes unexpected turns.

I am passionate about this place, this community and sharing God's love and grace, God's hospitality.

I want to welcome all
accept all
love all
share my gifts
and empower all to share your gifts – in this place of my epiphany.

What is calling you?

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An opportunity to reflect:

- *Place a flower in the water bowl, offering your hopes your gifts to the Christ child*

Write on butcher's paper

- *Highlights of 2008*
- *Hopes for 2009*
- *What gifts do you bring?*