

## **January 8, 2017 - Epiphanies**

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

I want to begin today by sharing a story that I found this week. It's a true story about two men named Peter and George who set out on a journey.

Several years ago, Peter and George set out on a trek 250 miles across the Himalayas. They said they were going on this journey to study the migratory and mating patterns of the blue sheep that lived on the sides of the mountains. But they both knew there was also the elusive possibility, along their way, of spotting the rarest and most beautiful of the great cats, the snow leopard. This creature can be viewed as a symbol of ultimate reality, fleeting beauty only seen in occasional snatches.

Leopards hide behind gnarled trees and granite cliffs way up at 4000 meters. A leopard is very rarely seen directly by a human. Yes, while you are observing docile sheep you might, unexpectedly, glimpse the movement of a big cat, just at the edge of your peripheral vision. But you never seem to see one when you are intent on doing so. Its momentary shadow is always a surprise. It only happens when you are attending to sheep.

Yet it is the seldom-seen snow leopard that forms the nub of Peters' search. Studying the blue sheep of the Himalayas is simply a cover, an

excuse.... something that lets him look legitimate in the eyes of society, while he searches on his own for what matters most, the gorgeous cat whose form is never seen straight on.

Adapted from: Belden D. Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, pages 79-80.

This reading comes from a book by a theologian named Belden Lane. Belden goes on to suggest that our lives are much like Peter and George's journey in the Himalayas. We tend to go about our days doing the ordinary work of our lives – ordinary work that must be done in order to pay the bills and care for our homes and our families, ordinary work like studying blue sheep or working in an office or driving a combine or even writing a sermon. But that ordinary job is just a cover for our real work. And our real work is in the search for glimpses of the snow leopard - glimpses of beauty, glimpses of truth, glimpses of the holy.

Each time we see a glimpse of the holy, it is as if a light has been shone on our lives. And this light allows us to see something for the first time, to understand something for the first time, or to believe something for the first time. These glimpses of truth or beauty, these glimpses of the holy are what we call epiphanies. In fact, the word epiphany comes from the Greek for revelation or appearance or coming. When we have an epiphany something new, some truth about ourselves, our world, or our God is revealed to us.

On January 6<sup>th</sup> each year we celebrate the day called Epiphany and at that time we enter the season following Epiphany. This is a season where we highlight ways in which the Holy Mystery is revealed in our lives. Today we begin with the story of the astrologers who, like George and Peter, went on a journey. This journey happened over 2000 years ago and in a different part of the world, but like Peter and George, their journey was connected to their ordinary jobs. They were men who studied the constellations in the night sky and who believed that happenings on earth could be predicted by the movement of those heavenly bodies. So when a special star appeared in the sky, they felt obliged to follow it.

They believed this star was predicting the birth of a Jewish king and they came with gifts for the new ruler. Of course, they got even more than they bargained for. They didn't just meet a king, they met an infant named Jesus, whose life, death and ongoing influence in the world would inspire a whole new religion. In Mary and Joseph's little child they caught a glimpse of their own snow leopard, they caught a glimpse of beauty, a glimpse of truth, a glimpse of the holy.

In many ways we spend our lives searching for glimpses of the snow leopard. Many of us travel to distant places, go on retreats or even come to worship on Sunday hoping for an epiphany, a glimpse of the holy. But the reality is that the holy is only seldom captured in the times and places where we seek it directly. Most often it is found in the ordinary times and places of our lives

It's kind of like my own search for the northern lights. I have been fascinated with this phenomena for many years and just recently found a website that helps predict when they are most likely to happen. More times than I would like to admit, following the wisdom of this website, I have driven north of town and sat on a lonely grid road staring north and waiting for the light show to begin. I have seen a few rays of light, a tiny bit of colour, but I have yet to glimpse the beauty of the aurora borealis. Everybody that I know who has seen these amazing lights has glimpsed them by happenstance while going about the ordinary tasks of their day – often while driving home on the highway at night or while heading out to the barn for one last check on their cattle. They have seen them in the periphery of their vision while walking or driving and then have stopped to take in their glory.

Even knowing this, I expect I will continue my deliberate search for this amazing phenomena, just like I will continue my search for the holy in my life. I am one of those people who goes out of my way to catch glimpses of the snow leopard. I have attended silent retreats and workshops and traveled to distant places in my search for truth and beauty. But I also know that many of my epiphanies have happened in the midst of ordinary living. That while I have been busy with the errands that filled my days, the holy has been revealed to me over and over again. I have seen the holy in the laugh of small child, in the twinkle in an older person's eyes, in the song of bird and in even during the meeting of a church committee. All I had to do was catch a glimpse of the snow leopard on the periphery of my vision and then take a moment to realize just what I had seen.

The Holy is with us no matter where we are or what we are doing. God's light is waiting to open our eyes to the truth and beauty that already exists in our lives. May we all catch a glimpse of that light and know the wonder of seeing ourselves and our world again, for the first time.