

**EPIPHANIES THAT SHATTER THE BOX**  
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**Epiphany 2010**

Over these 12 days of Christmas, I have made an intentional effort to listen to a series of sermons from Br. Curtis Almquist, the abbot of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge Massachusetts<sup>1</sup>. These are absolutely some of the best messages that I have heard in recent times. Much of what I will reflect on this morning is taken from what I heard and then turned into a message for you the people of St. Aidan's.

Throughout the gospels the temple authorities and other members of the establishment come in for very harsh treatment. Why is that? What is the point that the gospel writers are trying to make in their portrayal of those in power like Herod and those on the fringes like our shepherds?

Part or most of the problem in the first century was a mindset that I call the "God in a box" way of doing religion. The temple authorities had figured out how this whole God thing worked and theological development really wasn't going on. God was in that century literally contained in a box, think in terms of the ark of the covenant and the temple where God lived in a specific place inside the temple. Everything was understood and as long as you played by the rules, life would work out. At this point, a statement by Marcus Borg comes to mind. This is something like this; every time I have my image of God all sorted out, God shatters that image and I start again. God is so large so infinite that there is no way that we in our human life can ever truly understand God let alone confine God to a box of our design. Jesus in his incarnation was the ultimate shattering of the box of temple worship. He clearly came to explode that way of thinking and worship.

The Jewish authorities had lost what chosen meant. The ancient Hebrews were chosen to be an example to spread the word. They were not chosen to be a superior religion. Look back at your Hebrew Scriptures. God had tried to establish his reign with all people, but that didn't work so he chose Israel as his means of spreading the kingdom. By the first century those in control had their feet truly set in concrete. Revelation was done and finished, the time of the prophets was past.

So how does God in the incarnation break open this box that had been constructed? One word, dreams- Think how many dreams and visions we have in the Christmas story! Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, (4 times) and the Magi are all guided and advised by dreams. Joseph in Matthew is told not to set Mary aside, to flee to Egypt, to return and then to go to Nazareth all in dreams! The Magi, men of science of the time, are told after seeing Jesus to

return home another way and not to tell Harod what they have seen. All of these people respond by following the instructions of their dreams and revelations.

One of the gifts that the magi bring to the Christ Child is that they are willing to be surprised by God. They came to find out what God had done. They were curious, they were open to revelation and willing to respond.

Br. Almquest said in his sermon on redemption that God is always more in ways beyond what we could imagine. Our first century temple authorities had lost sight of this. God is always more than we can imagine. This means there is always something for God to reveal to us.

“If God were not ever increasing, we would risk reverencing the archives of our experience of God rather than worshiping the living God.” We run the great risk in worshiping our experience of God of turning our religion into a dead faith. God is always more and creates a longing for more. We are called to always seek the more.

Some people talk about an empty place that they long to fill. This place is that part of us that desires to be filled by God and is what drives us to be seekers. This hole is large in our world today. Unfortunately many seek to fill this hole not with God, but with things, accomplishments, anything that they think is lasting. However the only thing that is lasting that fills this hole is God. So how is this revealed to us? Like our first century friends in the gospels, this comes often in dreams. We all dream, whether we are aware of those dreams or not.

To dream though we must sleep. To sleep we must slow down and rest. To be available to hear God we must slow down and notice.

One third of the bible is made up of dreams and visions. The guidance of the bible is not rational, but visionary. Decisions in the Bible are made in response to these messages from God. Decisions that ignore dreams in the Bible often end badly. So the Bible calls us to listen to God in dreams and visions and yes everybody, anybody can have a divine revelation. In fact we all have them, but many of us are blind to them when they happen.

Br. Almquest stated that somewhere as we grow up we switch away from being open to this way of learning and listening and switch over to a scientific, rational way of reasoning and thinking. The problem is that we do not have much success in listening to God with our rational mind. Br. Curtiss was talking to an American Indian leader and he said that the problem with the white man is that he has forgotten to listen with his heart. God however often speaks to of us in astonishing ways and it is usually through our heart.

Thinking and listening with our hearts is not a rejection of reason, but a broadening of our ways of being in touch with the holy, the source of our life and the ground of our being.

In looking at this it is helpful to reflect on God's channels of revelation to us. How have you known God's revelation to you in the past? How have hunches, coincidences and other revelations helped you make decisions in the past?

When a revelation happens, test it. If it comes in a dream, ask for another dream. Ask God in a, do you really want this of me type of question, and see what happens. Of course you need to be prepared to respond if the answer is yes I really meant it!

If the revelation seems to come out of left field, then set it aside and wait for more confirmation. If this doesn't seem like it connects to you then set it aside, ask God for clarity and then listen. The problem is that this requires patience, which many of us have in short supply and even more challenging this requires time to sit and be open. A spiritual discipline that includes time to listen to God is an essential part of being a spiritual being.

Once you have an answer share it with someone who knows you and has a good prayer life. This is at the heart of what good spiritual direction is meant to be.

Which brings us to the question of what is God trying to reveal to you this Christmastide. What Epiphany is out there waiting for you as you come and gaze upon the baby? What is the road you need to travel, what is the star that will guide you?

On another level, what is the revelation that God has for St. Aidan's in this new year. Where are we being called to go in 2010 and beyond? I feel more strongly now than ever before that we are at a moment in our parish life where God is about to reveal to us something very important. I do not yet know what that is. We as a congregation do not yet know what this is, but we as a congregation are called to seek this revelation. We are called to be open to going where the Spirit will lead. Like the magi we are called to be ready and willing to be surprised by God in our lives.

We are called to dream.

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<sup>1</sup> These sermons can be found at the website of SSJE <http://ssje.org/twelvedays/?p=3>