

IN PURSUIT OF GOD

Ephiphany: Arise! Shine!

Matthew 2:1-12

People have found lots of interesting ways to describe God.

One of the more striking, that I've heard,
is to call God the "Hound of Heaven."

That phrase was coined by English poet Francis Thompson,
a hundred years in a poem, by that title.

References to the poem, Hound of Heaven,
have wound up in the writings of

J.R.R. Tolkien, the U.S. Supreme Court, and Monty Python
(I dare say, you've never heard those in the same sentence).

The poem inspired one artist to paint a series of 23 paintings.

The narrator of the poem talks about fleeing from God,
and about God's feet that followed after with
"unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace,
deliberate speed, majestic instancy."

Now . . . it is a profound truth
that God *indeed* is a pursuer.

God deeply desires to be in relationship—
loving, mutual, unobstructed, relationship—
with us human beings.

God has been pursuing us ever since that fateful evening stroll
in the Garden of Eden, calling to Adam, "*Where are you?*"

God pursued us humans everywhere
from the Garden of Eden to the Land of Nod,
from Egypt to Canaan,
from Babylon to Palestine.

God pursued us with the aid of judges and prophets,
with the help of wise and compassionate widows,
and Canaanites,
and other outsiders.

God has lovingly, relentlessly, doggedly . . . pursued us.
The Hound of Heaven.

But God never intended to be the sole pursuer.
There needs to be *mutual* pursuit.

No . . . we are *not* equals in this God-human relationship
but God never intended to do all the work to make it happen.
Good relationships take more than one.
For the love between God and us human beings to be complete,
there needs *also* to be a pursuit of God.

That's what the story behind Epiphany is all about.

Its about a group of wise persons
who apparently made a life out of watching for signs
and pursuing them.

One time they noticed something extraordinary in the heavens.
They assumed God was up to something big.

But they were not content to sit back
in the luxury and safety of home

hiding behind their star charts and academic speculations.

They packed up their things and went in pursuit of God.

They went in full expectation that they would find and see first-hand
what God was doing,
and offer their personal and material gifts of devotion.

They sacrificed whatever was necessary
in order to engage in this pursuit.

This is a wonderful story steeped in tradition—
tradition that has, of course, been exaggerated,
and romanticized,
and made mysterious and "other-worldly."

A few years ago, on an anniversary trip to Europe,
Irene and I visited the cathedral in Cologne, Germany.

It took them 632 years to finish what is now
the largest Gothic church in northern Europe.

And the *whole reason* this magnificent church was built,
was to make a sanctuary for three gold-plated boxes,
studded with over 1,000 precious jewels.

A house for three holy boxes,
inside of which—we were told—
are the bones of the three Kings.

We all have distinct and detailed images in our heads,

of what these three kings looked like,
which make for great Christmas card pictures,
and fun Christmas carols . . . “We three kings of Orient are . . .”
The images of three Kings are reinforced in paintings and stories
and even a famous opera.

The actual story comes from the Bible of course,
but scripture contains not a word
of them being “three”
or being “kings”
or wearing robes and large crowns,
or riding camels,
or seeing a star with a long tail,
or bowing to worship in a stable or at a manger.
Not a word.

All we get from the Bible is that there was more than one.
They were wise.
They associated a particular rising star with the birth of a king.
And made a long trip to get the details, and bring gifts.
That’s the simple story.

But to me, there is a lot more useful and inspiring truth
in that bare-bones story,
than there is in any legend
of three kings in purple robes riding camels.

Because here is the crux of the story, I think:
They *looked for*, and noticed, evidence of the work of God,
and *pursued* it.
On their own accord, they chose to leave their comfort zone,
and move toward whatever significant thing this was,
that God was doing in this world.
They were astrologers, apparently, but what they really cared about
was, ultimately, *not* in the sky.
They looked to the stars for the express purpose,
of figuring out what God was doing *down here*.
And when they discovered something, they acted on it.
They got involved.
They pursued the activity of God, as they observed it.

That’s more than can be said for most of us God-seekers, I’m afraid.
We’re not geared to think that way about Christian faith.
Especially not in our North American culture.
I don’t think I’m taking too much of a leap to say,
the biggest single obstacle that prevents the church today
from being the kind of church God calls us to be,
and keeps us from pursuing God,
is consumerism.

Now that might seem random, and bold, but *think* about it.
Consumerism is the sworn enemy
of radical Christian discipleship.
And it’s all around us.
We swim in it like fish in water.
And like fish, we’re oblivious to it.
There’s an old saying, “Whoever discovered water,
most likely was not a fish.”

Now lest you think I’m just saying this in protest of the fact
that we just wrapped up the biggest shopping season of the year . . .
lest you think I’m just preaching against
the commercialization of Christmas . . .
I’m *not*.

Yes, I think we *have* WAY overdone
buying and giving gifts at Christmas,
and we ought to work at creative alternatives.
And yes, I think it’s shameful that the health of our national economy
rests so much on how much stuff we buy.

But my point right now is not just our shopping habits.
It’s our whole approach to life, to relationships,
to family, to marriage, and to almost every arena of life
including religion,
including church.
We have come to accept as normal, that life is really about me,
it’s about discovering my needs, and feeding those needs.
It’s about what I consume,
what I feed on for *my* happiness and *my* need-fulfillment.
Consumerism may be most obvious in reference to material things

home furnishings, fashion, electronics,
cars, food, housing.

But I think it's inevitable, immersed as we are in this culture,
that we start thinking like a consumer,
when it comes to the church.
Church is about us and our self-defined needs.
And at some point we completely distort
the reason we exist as a church.

In the book, "StormFront: the Good News of God,"
several authors make a point that consumerism
has come to *define* the church experience.
They write, "We confuse the gospel with an infomercial,
and we confuse the community of God's people
with vendors of spiritual goods and services."

All of us, to some extent, have fallen prey to this.
We evaluate church on the basis of what we get out of it.
If church is "meeting our needs," we're happy as a clam.
If it's not "meeting our needs," we look for a church that *does*.

That way of thinking is not just deadly for the church.
It's deadly for our personal spiritual journey.

The God of the scriptures invites us on a life journey
of participating in something much larger than ourselves.
We, the people of God, are invited to participate with God,
in God's mission of establishing the reign of God on the earth.
We are called to be God's holy nation and priestly people,
to serve God for the sake of the world.
We, the church, are but tools in God's hands,
for God to use as God wills.

The gospel is *not* about us. It's about God.
That ought to be obvious, but it's often *not* the way we think.
The word "gospel" means "good news,"
so we try to present the gospel in an appealing way,
that it's good news to whoever happens to be hearing it.

When I prepare a sermon, I often ask the question,
"Now what is the good news for the people in my congregation,
and how can I best proclaim it?"

That's not necessarily a bad question,
but when the New Testament speaks of proclaiming the Gospel,
it's rarely about giving people what they want to hear.
When Jesus refers to the good news,
he's nearly always talking about the reign and rule of God.
When the apostles write letters to the church about the Gospel,
they're always referring to what God has done in Jesus.
It's *not about us*, sisters and brothers!
The Gospel is about what God has done in the world through Christ,
and about the Kingdom of Christ God is still bringing about.
Sometimes that kingdom is welcomed. Often it's not.
Either by *us*, or by those *outside* the church.

Our mission is not to proclaim
whatever *sounds* like good news to our ears personally.
It's about observing and investigating
what God is now doing in the world,
to save, redeem, restore, and reconcile.
And then making the effort to pursue and participate in that work.
That may not be welcome news to everyone.

Before we start working on God's project in this world,
we need to *realize*—
the powers of this world—
political, material, systemic, and/or demonic powers—
consistently work at cross-purposes with God.
If we are working on God's project, beware!
If God is really doing what Mary sang about in the Magnificat,
bringing down the powerful from their thrones,
and raising up the poor and lowly,
then participating in God's work,
may *not* be the most pleasant work available.
It may not *sound* like good news for those of us
called to join the work.

The universal symbol of the Gospel is *not* a candy-cane.

It's a cross.

And making it gold-plated or jewel-studded,
and hanging it on a wall or around our necks,
doesn't change it.

The symbol of the Gospel is still an instrument of death.

It reminds us of Christ's suffering.

It reminds us of the cost involved
if we choose to actively pursue,
and participate in this holy gospel drama.

But our North American culture of consumerism
has tamed the cross, made it something attractive,
something people want to buy.

As the authors of the book "StormFront" said,
"North Americans prefer a religion of receiving
more than a religion of participation."

We don't want to think too long and hard about a gospel
that calls us to lay down ourselves and our needs,
and to lose ourselves in a project that's bigger than us.

But that's precisely what the magi did,
when they saw the star rising in the east,
and realized God was up to something larger and more momentous
than what they could imagine.
They laid down their personal need of home and security and safety,
and went to participate in this thing beyond themselves.
That's the heart of the story, behind all that glittering gold.

The *star is still in the sky*, brothers and sisters!
There are signs all around us
that God is up to something bigger than us.
God is *still* working to raise up the poor,
to fill the hungry with good things,
to bring down the proud from their thrones.
God is *still* working to save what is lost . . .
restore what has fallen . . .
redeem what has been discarded . . .

heal what is wounded . . .
reconcile what is alienated . . .

There's a star rising in the larger world, in pockets,
here and there and every place . . .
where followers of Jesus are living, and demonstrating,
and forming new kinds of community,
and proclaiming the good news of God's whole
salvation,
and where the strong arms of oppressors
and ethnic and religious extremists,
are being weakened, undermined by radical Christians
who are being beautiful fools for Christ,
and do foolish things like
sit down and talk with their avowed enemies,
build houses for them,
educate their women and children,
dig wells,
give comforters or school kits,
stand beside families whose homes are being
bulldozed.

There's a star rising in parts of our *own* community—
sometimes without a big flash of light.
Simple and small expressions of church are sprouting up nearby
to welcome those that traditional churches fail to reach.
The homeless are not only given food and physical shelter,
but are given love, and a sense of community, and
dignity.
Immigrants,
though many of our neighbors fear and despise them,
are, here and there, welcomed with open arms of
hospitality.
Representatives of warring religions—
Islam, Judaism, Christianity—
visit each other's local houses of worship
and dare to say we have gifts we can offer each
other,
if we remain true to our faith.

And this despite outright hostility
that exists in our community.

as we come to the Lord's table this morning,
on this first Sunday of a new year.

There's a star rising in our own congregation—
where more people are considering making radical changes
in their daily routines to be faithful disciples of Jesus.
They are living in a manner more fitting with values
of simplicity and community and care for the earth
than the lifestyles our larger culture has tried to make
normal.
They are deepening their experience of small groups,
deciding it actually makes sense to spend *more time*
together,
rather than *less*,
when our lives get hectic and over-filled with busy-
ness.
They are actively pursuing relationships with their neighbors,
and with persons who are not like themselves.

We use the phrase "receiving communion"
and that's *accurate*.
The elements are offered, and we take them.
But it's *more* accurate to say we "partake."
We participate in this re-enactment.
And by so doing we participate, at some level,
in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There are signs that God is still doing things in our world,
in our community, in our church.
There are signs God is acting to draw us and others
into a more holistic salvation.

In Jesus Christ, God acted . . . in the world . . . for its salvation.
God continues to act in the world today.
And at the table we join in communion with God,
in communion with each other;
and we say, we belong to you, Lord,
here we are...at your service.

The star is rising.
Will we be self-oriented consumers?
. . . or God-oriented collaborators?
Will we stay home where it's comfortable?—
hiding behind the star charts,
and remarking on the beauty of that rising star.
Or will we be like the magi?—
pack up, saddle up, and head out in dogged pursuit of God,
and whatever God is up to in our world.

Yes, we are nurtured and sustained by this ritual.
But primarily, in it we offer ourselves to God.
We participate in the continuing work of God.

—Phil Kniss, January 3, 2010

Will we admire from a distance the salvation that God is bringing?
Or will we participate in it?

That is the question I would like us to hold in our hearts,
to ponder,