

“Opening a Window for God as Spirit”

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Isaiah 60:1-5

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 his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Today, we hear the story of foreign visitors who bring gifts to Jesus. When you hear this text, what do you think of? Do you let your mind wander with these travelers? Do you wonder what this story has to offer you here? Today?

Maybe you think about your own spiritual journey, wondering how you can know when to start a new faith adventure, or let one end. Perhaps you think of your stewardship of the gifts in your own life. Or maybe you wonder how you can recognize divine signs, messages that point to God's way for you.

Matthew 2:1-2, 7-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ... Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been

warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew tells us that foreign priests saw the Christmas star and followed it, looking for ... Jesus. It would have been a spiritual journey, “a converging moment of new, divinely communicated clarity” (88).

This encounter with God’s presence is our topic this morning. God will meet us in a variety of ways. Sometimes it’s through a new insight – a dawning understanding about faith or God. Sometimes we learn a new piece of information that changes our convictions. This might happen through scripture or reading or even listening.

Other times we might have a piercing insight at an emotional or intuitive level that totally shifts the way we live. We also meet God through spiritual nudges, brief moments when we know God’s presence in a tangible way, when we feel led in a certain direction or experience Spirit-led emotions.

These God moments may be fleeting or may last for a short while but in order for them to continue moving any of us along our spiritual path they absolutely must be fed. Our cat Azriel likes to play soccer with her toys, batting or nudging them across the floor. It’s fun to watch her. But as soon as she stops, the toy stops. It won’t go anywhere without her efforts. In a similar way, your God moment may be quite amazing yet without your efforts to keep the flame alive and to encourage similar moments, it will quickly fade.

We’ve been bringing up MCCI regularly the last few months. Sue Nilson Kibbey, the author of MCCI calls these moments “Conflux Moments.” I think we need a different name. If one comes to you, would you let me know?

We have each grown spiritually because of the God moments we’ve had that gave us momentum and motivation to want to know God or to follow Christ more closely. Sometimes these moments happen when we’re in crisis or at a crossroads; sometimes we’ve been praying or searching. Other times, God connects with us in the everyday ordinary things.

It’s always God who does the connecting but we have a part in this too. We need to be paying attention and we need to leave God openings, keeping the window up in our lives so that the Spirit can enter. God is always looking for ways to squeeze past our worries, preoccupations and busynesses, to seeking ways to connect with your spirit to transform your life.

Think back for a moment. How did God moments arise in your life – in the past?

I remember years of lighting the Advent candles on top of our old piano. I'd stare at the flames or at the nativity scene that we set up right next to the wreath as someone read part of the Christmas story. One of my parent would say something wise and we'd sing a Christmas carol. Did God speak to me in those moments? Probably, though I don't remember. I don't doubt that this – along with regular church participation – was part of what kept me walking on God's path.

When I was in confirmation class, we were encouraged to establish some kind of evening devotions. It was during my prayers one evening that I experienced an absolute, unquestionable awareness of God's loving, caring presence. Afterward, I never questioned God's existence; I never balked at going to church and was active in every church activity that offered itself.

At a lowest point in my marriage, God shined the light from the top of the hole I was sitting in. I accepted that I needed to follow God's path for me and not be consumed by my own pain or distracted by others' discouragement. I kept up my devotions, studies and church participation. Soon after this, the District Committee suggested that I consider pursuing an MDiv at seminary.

A few weeks ago, I received a text from a friend. It was just a newsy bit about the fun of having family over at Christmas. I thought about the love I have for my friend and for their family. Suddenly I was awash in emotion – in love – beyond anything I'd ever experienced. This wasn't about visiting relatives or cherished friends but about God who loves all of creation unfathomably. I'm still living into this one, but if I want to grow, I know that I need to keep feeding the fire.

Besides big moments, though, we also have small touches of God's presence. I've noticed God as Spirit *suggesting* that I do or don't do, say or don't say things for at least the last dozen years. And I've also noticed that the more I follow these promptings, the more I experience and the easier they are to notice. I was using Sue's book to help me with this sermon but I forgot and left it on my desk on Thursday. I was ready to turn the car around when that small, almost-voice suggested, "No, leave it," so I continued on to my visit at Wausau Manor.

Do you see a pattern? God takes every opportunity – at church, in the car, at home, wherever – and God taps us on the shoulder or maybe hits us with a spiritual 2x4. When this happens, we can either say, "That's neat," and go about our business until the moment fades from our hearts and minds. Or we can let God as Spirit propel us ahead – not just once, but again and again – as we grow in faith.

I could also tell you about times when conflux moments were lost because I did not keep them fueled and they disappeared. For the two years before coming to Wausau I was part

of a Wesleyan accountability small group – five of us met each week to share how we had (or hadn't) lived into God's call for our lives. They are still active in Appleton but I'm here. And knowing that I don't have to tell anyone how I'm doing at living out my faith has impacted my spiritual journey. Wanna join a small group?

Please hear me that I'm not talking about times you've studied and learned more about God. A conflux God moment can include the mind but it's not heady. No. It's "a living, God-confluence occurrence of any proportion when your spiritual earth shifts beneath you, a small or large part of your old paradigm splinters and falls away, and you are set in motion to think, act, and move forward differently in your faith" (91).

When has this happened to you? Think back. I'm going to pause while Rob plays and you reflect into your past. After a moment, I'll add another suggestion. (*pause*)

In what spirit-igniting moment have God's Spirit and yours converged lately? Let a picture unfold in your mind. Hear what you heard then. Feel what you felt. Open yourself again to the moment. (*pause*)

The wise men were changed by their experience of traveling and then of greeting the new king. Kneeling before the manger changed their perspective.

They had said, Yes, to God in a different, deeper way. This is God's hope for each of us. That we, too, will say, Yes, to God and let God as Spirit lead us deeper into the life God as for us.

Source material:

Sue Nilson Kibbey, *Flood Gates: Holy Momentum for a Fearless Church*, "Flood Gate #5: Conflux Moments," 2016, 87-104.