

Church of the Resurrection – Last Sunday After the Epiphany, Year B – February 22, 2009
Sermon by Ruth Eller

*For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
(2 Corinthians 4:6)*

Epiphany is the season of revelation, the season of light. The Wise Men followed the light of the star to find the child who was the light of the world. On the Sundays following the feast of that epiphany, we have marked other illuminations: the baptism of Our Lord, revealing his special relationship with God; the calling of the disciples, who recognized his authority; the power of his healing word and touch; and today, at the end of the season, we witness the moment when his closest friends suddenly realize just Who they are dealing with.

So what we have experienced is both a single revelation—about the identity of Jesus—and a series of epiphanies, glimpses of what Christ means for us. I think this is a fair reflection of most religious experience. Speaking for myself, at least, I have a general idea about the love of God and the goodness and meaning of life. But that idea is not a consistently powerful revelation that keeps me on the mountaintop all the time. Instead, every once in a while I have a shining glimpse of the solid reality behind this vague notion. Sometimes such a little epiphany comes when I am troubled or depressed—a sudden conviction that Christ, the One Who Suffers, is there with me. Sometimes it comes in an overwhelming experience of the beauty and wonder of the natural world—I spoke of this on Evolution Sunday. Other times it is a glimpse of the love of God at work in the love of human beings for one another. All of these are epiphanies.

One such experience was more prolonged, and I want to share it with you. I spent three weeks in the Epiphany season of 2003 in the far Southern Ocean and Antarctica. This is still one of the peak experiences of my life, one in which the world was as it were transfigured for me.

For most of the time I was away we were out of touch with the rest of the planet, as far as the news of the day is concerned. The ship picked up one message about the U.S. Navy going on full alert, but that was it. Yet in another way we were fully in touch. The Southern Ocean is the womb of the world. It is teeming with life. We stood beside and even within colonies of penguins numbering in the hundreds of thousands. We floated alongside sleeping whales. We watched dolphins catching a ride on our bow wake. Behind us glided giant petrels, and albatross sailing on their narrow twelve-foot wingspan. Minke whales, who are supposed to be shy, slipped under and around our little inflatable boats, called Zodiaks, playing with us. A curious leopard seal—the Bad Boy of the Antarctic, with his sinister smile—passed up an easy lunch (splashing penguins) to follow us and nip at the back of our Zodiak.

We glided between deep green-blue icebergs in the afternoon and at cocktail time listened to thousand-year-old oxygen bubbles pop from the ice in our drinks. One night we actually slept “on The Ice”—meaning the continent itself. In the early hours we peeked out from our bright red bivvy sacks to see the Southern Cross overhead and a few Adelie penguins standing guard by the shore.

And we saw other human life, too. We picked up some Bulgarian scientists who

were closing their base for the winter, after a season spent studying Gentoo penguins. We visited the station where researchers discovered the hole in the ozone. It was a British base then, but it was sold to the Ukraine for one dollar, on condition the Ukrainians would continue to monitor the ozone. Our hosts served us homemade vodka (also for one dollar) in wine glasses. It was a Sunday morning, and I shared mine around. It was like administering Communion.

The thing is, Antarctica doesn't belong to anybody. Or rather, it belongs to everybody. True, some have made claims. And if oil is discovered—well, who knows? But at the moment, it still reveals what God intended this world to be. The animals are not afraid of us. We are not afraid of one another.

The voyage I was on included visits to places immortalized in the saga of explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton's expedition of 1914-1916. Shackleton and his men approached The Ice just as the First World War was beginning. When their ship, the *Endurance*, was crushed, they made it back against all odds, for eighteen months experiencing hardship and suffering of all kinds. Yet all twenty-eight men in the party survived. When they emerged, in the words of one historian, it was to "a world gone mad". Of course they all signed up to fight for King and Country, and what all the forces of nature could not accomplish the battlefields of Europe soon achieved.

I was only gone three weeks, but when I returned I felt a little bit the way they must have felt. During three revelatory weeks I had a string of small epiphanies about the purity and the power of nature. This is Christ the Logos, the creative force of the universe—the Word, without whom nothing was made that is made—welling up in the ocean and on the beaches of the starkest, most beautiful land imaginable. I had a glimpse of the way even human beings can get along with one another. This surely is the reconciling love of God at work, drawing God's children together. And then at the airport in Buenos Aires I bought a day-old copy of the *New York Times*.

My friends, the epiphanies that we are granted through scripture and through our own experience are given to us to show us there is another way to see the world, another way to behave, than the ways we so easily slide into. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that some cannot see the Good News because "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." The god of this world is the voice that tells us there is only one way to be, only one way to behave. It is the cynical voice that says only force can make good things happen—that the end justifies the means. And yes, it is the voice that has spoken many times over history, and which spoke recently through the mouth of a Utah senator. Whatever you call it—bigotry, tribalism, hatred—the god of this world always proclaims that people different from ourselves are evil and dangerous and therefore must at the very least be denied their dignity as children of God, at the most, be wiped from the face of the earth.

Over against the whisperings of this god, we place the vision of the transfigured Christ. He is the shining example of another way, the way of love and reconciliation, the way that the true God intended for us from the beginning, placing us in this beautiful world swimming with life. And it is our duty and our privilege to share this epiphany. With Peter and James and John, who shared their revelation with us, we must spread the Good News to others. *For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*

