

## Signs of the unexpected

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January 2, 2011, Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

A new minister has come to the small town of Words, Wisconsin. Winifred Smith, Winnie to friends and congregants, is beginning her first pastorate. Her morning devotions, a nursing home visit, a stop at the bakery and other ordinary chores all precede this extraordinary experience.

*Winnie wondered where she would end up if she drove south on the road instead of north. She had never continued past the Woolever's home. And because of the leaves blowing from trees like torn brown parchment pages and thin ribbons of steel grey diaphanous clouds stretching out of the horizon in trails of lost grandeur, Winnie drove south, following the winding road between irregular stretches of oak, birch and pine.*

Her afternoon drive takes her to a small footbridge over a creek.

*The clear cold water ran beneath her brown shoes... Once again she was reminded of her dream from the night before. Checking her desire to eat the remaining portion of her pastry, she tossed it into the water as an offering of thanks and watched it float downstream and around a switchback. Crisp autumn wind moved through her thin shirt touching her skin. A sugary buoyancy filled her stomach. She contemplated both sensations on her way back to the car.*

*As she climbed behind the wheel she was startled to feel her name spoken. "Winifred." She climbed out and turned back to the bridge, hoping to find someone behind her. She was alone. But she was certain of having heard her name spoken in a clear voice with throaty personality. ...it had resembled her own voice speaking without the usual interior echo – from the outside. She walked back to the bridge, stood in the middle of the planks and listened.*

*Once again she heard her name spoken, this time in its more familiar appellation: "Winnie." Accompanying the sound came the sense of someone beside her, behind her, around her, someone she couldn't see and couldn't touch, someone whose presence was intensified through the absence of anything to attribute it to.*

*The feeling of buoyancy she had earlier experienced in her stomach delightfully changed and spread through the rest of her body. She felt light enough to float. It seemed as if the breeze moving across the marsh could carry her with it. She held this feeling for a moment and then realized something very uncommon was happening. The grasses in the ditch seemed to be glowing. The red, cone-shaped sumac tops burned like incandescent lamps in a bluish light unlike any she had ever seen yet instinctively recognized. And the pleasure of recognition – discovering the familiar within the unknown – comforted her with its stillness... The light glowing within the sumac and grasses glowed within her, within everything. They sang with her through the light, jubilantly, compassionately, timelessly connecting her to the past, present and future. Boundaries did not exist. Everything breathed...*

*The miracle of consciousness, the hiding place of God, split open like a fruit too large for its peel. Time lost its linear appeal and assumed the form of the wholly holy.*

*Events, forces and mind were the same thing creatively at work. The world and the Kingdom of God became factually identical; each existed one in the other. The solitary miracle of Pure Grace held everything else inside it, wonder and peace. Death stood before her and she recognized it – a mere shadow cast by life, not a separation; the breathing of life bound it up as shape binds substance. (from pp 107-109)*

From the chapter entitled *Epiphany*, in the novel, **Driftless** by David Rhodes.

Epiphany. The light goes on and we see and understand in a new way.

Epiphany. The wise ones saw a light. It seemed to call to them, and they followed. The star drew them on a trek, many, many miles across borders and boundaries, to seek an unknown king.

The light Saul encountered on the road to Damascus did not beckon. It stopped him in his tracks. The blinding light compelled him to see in a new way. It not only caused him to reconsider the road he was traveling, but the whole trajectory of his life changed.

The light that met Saul was not unlike the star that drew the magi; it was personal, and yet it was for the whole world. The light, created good from the beginning, was not only for the chosen people of God but for gentiles the world over.

How can something as common and universal as light be personal? Has it happened to you? The light shifts, branches glow, dust motes hover in a rainbow, suspended in time. Your attention focuses for an instant, maybe a fraction longer. You try to capture the feeling, the glimmer of eternal beauty and oneness that seems yours and yet must be for the whole world. And then it is gone, in a flash, in a breath, in the gentle, unconscious, turning of the Earth.

An experience like this is powerful, unique; we want to describe it, share it. Indeed, Winnie decides she must share the event with her congregation, perhaps to inspire, perhaps as a confirmation of her call to ministry. But such an intimate incident. Perhaps she should begin with those faithful few who gather Wednesday evenings for prayer and Bible study.

*Winnie, her face glowing, walked to the front. "I have something to tell you," she said... With her eyes darting from one old face to the next, she began to describe her experience.*

*Soon, April Wilson asked, where, exactly, this had taken place – a stream, a creek, or river?*

*Lyle Fry asked what stream it was.*

*Winnie said it was down the road from Woolever's house.*

*"Which way?" asked Lyle.*

*"South," said Winnie.*

*"Oh, I know where you mean," said Lyle.*

*"That's Mule Creek," said Ardith Stanley. "At least that's what we called it. People fish there."*

*"My husband, Floyd, used to fish there," said Norma Hinkley. "It was a good trout stream. A lot of suckers, though."*

*"You can eat suckers," said April. "I can remember Mother cooking them. The whole house would smell, but we didn't mind. We were so hungry we could eat anything."*

*“It wasn’t like it is now,” said Ester Thrit. “Just having some kind of dessert was a treat. At Christmas, folks used to go into town and come back with nothing but a box of oranges. Those oranges tasted so good. Not like the oranges they have today.” (from p.132)*

And so the good people of the Words Friends of Jesus Church talk on and on, from fish to oranges to genetically altered food. Winnie’s profound life changing experience is lost on them, untranslatable to a group who has come prepared to study and discuss II Timothy.

How was it for the magi, trying to explain the inexplicable draw they felt to the star? Did their wives and families laugh at them, smirk beneath their veils or get angry at being left with all the chores, the bills, the children?

For his part, Paul attempts several descriptions in his letters to explain his experience on the road — the light and the voice. For those of us who care about such things, not all the accounts line up exactly. But clearly, something happened on the road to turn him in a different direction. He even changed his name.

For those of us who try to model our lives after Jesus, the stories of the magi and Paul are not unfamiliar. We know the stories by heart, and we may even have some of Paul’s writings committed to memory. Still, it is a struggle to synthesize the meaning of the light, the voice, the total life turn around that people embrace when they have an encounter with... whatever it is.

How does one explain the mystical events in the Bible: a chariot of fire swooping from the heavens, the appearance of a dove at baptism, the healing of leprosy, Jesus

transfigured on the mountain, flames atop heads at Pentecost. And what about miracles attributed to the saints?

We who embrace the left brain, with its facts and rationality, tend to discount these great stories as hyperbole or perhaps even hallucination.

Those of us who trend toward the right brain may understand these stories as metaphorical art that still hold traces of beauty across culture and millennia.

Left brained or right, there is hardly any way to translate a mystical experience into words without it sounding like the storyteller is just a bit loose in the head. I have not yet finished this book, **Driftless**, so the question crossed my mind, "Was this a real spiritual experience that Winnie was having or was she just having a psychotic breakdown?" (Eric, who has finished the book, assured me this was not a breakdown but a turning point in her life.)

If a mystical event cannot be adequately described with words, how do we share this most amazing of experiences, the rare time it happens? We hardly know how to speak of the strangely holy occurrences. What if we are met with incredulity or perhaps worse, like for Winnie, the response turns to fishing and fruit?

Perhaps the most reliable translation for those experiences, which are so holy as to be unspeakable, is the life lived afterward. If one's life is changed, either by literally turning down a different road or figuratively choosing an alternate life path, that begins to explain the unusual experience.

The wise ones, who we imagine as royalty themselves, followed the star and bowed down before the wee child to which they were led. Paul was blinded by the light that brought him to his knees. He listened to the voice from out of the light. In some

strange way, the magi and Paul, by their subsequent life choices, become a kind of light for us. We see not what they saw, but how they responded. We hear not what they heard but their actions echo over the years.

Each Sunday during this Advent and Christmas season, we have practiced stilling ourselves. We have been seeking the silence that so eludes us in our noisy city and our interior world. As has been stated several times throughout the season, there is no great expectation that these few moments of attempted quiet will bring deep revelation. Epiphany is an astonishing surprise after all.

But to stop, to pay attention, to practice seeking the light inside or out, we do begin to allow the possibility that something might break through. When we are still we may catch a whiff of connection to each other, to the world, to that greater light and love that surrounds and envelops us.

Perhaps we will discover, like the magi and Paul, that the best way to articulate the personal love we feel is to make it universal. Perhaps the old adage is true: Actions speak louder than words. We too can become signs of light and love.

Arise, shine; for your light has come! The glory of God is rising upon you!