

Bob Sessions
Follow the Light Sermon
New Song
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One of the first rules of photography is to follow the light. In our main story for this Epiphany season, the three wise men weren't into photography, but they also knew to follow the light. Because they did, in this cold and dark season we have one of our most important celebrations. Epiphany, a celebration of revelation, of the manifestation of incarnation, of the sacred coming into our conscious experience.

I would like to explore with you this morning some of what I have learned about light and sacred vision from my photography. (As many of you know, I've taken up photography in retirement and you can see my photos on Instagram and Facebook.)



One of the striking features of the epiphany story is **where** the light led the Magi. Not to a palace or a villa, not to a home of the wealthy elite or to an ancient holy place. Instead, think of how surprised the Magi probably were when the light led them to a stable, perhaps in a cave, where an unknown peasant couple from the sticks had laid their baby in a manger, an animal bed. Not the kind of place you expect to find royalty!

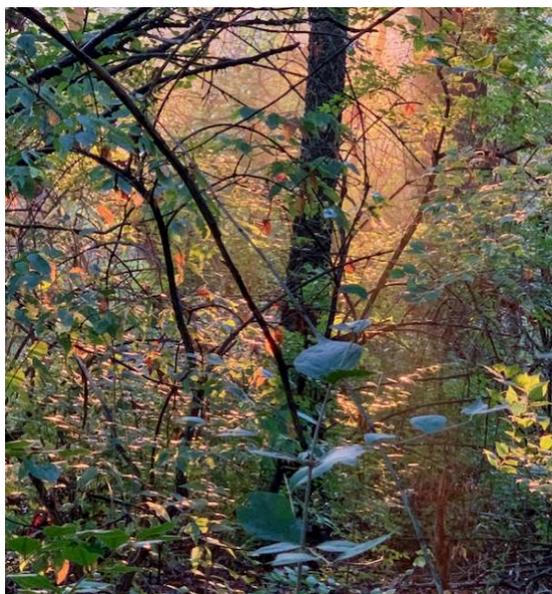
Now if you've seen my photographs on social media you know how much I love the glories of sunrises and sunsets. I would be the last to disparage such beauty, but I've also learned to love what the Japanese call *wabi sabi*. Wabi sabi is a term used to describe the beauty to be found in imperfection. It celebrates the beauty of worn, frayed, old, and common things. Think of decrepit barns, old rustic doors, and wrinkled faces. Seen in the right light and from a particular angle, beauty is revealed. Get the light or angle wrong, and the image is plain or even ugly.



So how have I learned to photograph the beauties of wabi sabi? That's the heart of what I want to talk about this morning, for part of the meaning of Epiphany is an invitation to see everything in the world differently. Jesus' central message is dramatically counter cultural, just as the learning to love *wabi sabi* is.

As a photographer, I've learned that to a great extent it's not about the gear. Yes, I would love to have a long lens to allow me to get close ups of birds, or a macro lens to help me picture small insects, and a new Sony would have made a splendid Christmas gift. But most cameras, including those built into our smart phones, will do the job. It's more about intention, patience, practice and serendipity. And the light.

So let's take these one at a time.



If I'm not clear about what I'm trying to do with a photograph, I usually fail to get a photo that reveals much. Sometimes you can get lucky, of course, but random shooting usually results in something plain and uninteresting. It lacks *chi*, soul. Every photographer I've talked to, every course I've taken, begins with an emphasis on intention. And every text on spiritual experience I've read emphasizes the importance of preparation, letting go, quieting the mind...in other words, intention. To be able to see the world differently you need to be in a different state. You might want to learn to take terrific photos or be truly compassionate, but unless you're in the right frame of mind, most likely you'll only be able to pretend to see the world differently.

Anyone who has tried to meditate understands that effort and practice are crucial. Showing up truly is half the secret, both in photography and in order to make spiritual progress. Photography is hard work. You have to take many pictures, including many of the same subject using changes in settings and angles, and then you need to study your results. Often being where you want to take your pictures requires real effort, time and expense. Photography can require a pilgrimage, in other words. The journey of the spirit has similar challenges.



What I am finding more and more as I practice my photography is that the state when remarkable photos happen is when I am beside myself, in the background, unselfconscious. It's not about me. In a sense, the photograph takes itself. If I am clear what I want to do and have an almost intuitive sense for what to do with the camera, it's a kind of magic when that beautiful photo happens. Often it's not quite what I imagined, and that's the serendipity emerging.



When we were in Alaska in November, it was a challenge to photograph the Northern Lights. Like sunsets, they're glorious to behold, and it's not surprising that there are many myths about

deities being involved in their ephemeral antics. I faced a steep learning curve trying to figure out how to photograph the aurora, as I couldn't get my camera to focus on them directly. Our first night brought a brief but beautiful display, but in my frustration I couldn't enjoy it. I spent the next day trying to learn how to adjust to this unique challenge and was helped by two friendly fellow photographers. (This often happens on pilgrimages.) What they taught me was to relax and change my usual methods—a combination of changing my psychology and my photographic technique. I'm happy to say that I got some much better photos in our next nights.

So...to experience the beauties and glories of *wabi sabi* we must change our ability to see, and that requires us to practice and discipline ourselves so that our egos are diminished. Easier said than done for most of us, of course. But the spiritual path is always a work in progress, and we shouldn't be discouraged if we are just getting glimpses of the light that shines in and through the world. It helps, too, I think, if we realize that the incarnation that the Magi found is everywhere. That is, God's incarnation was not a one-time event. Rather, what epiphany celebrates is the revelation of what is already here. As our psalm for today says "For with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light."



God fills the world, but like the beauty of *wabi sabi* we cannot see it unless we experience a breakthrough of our ordinary seeing, or an epiphany. The magi learned to follow the light to find God in a most humble place. Hopefully we, too, can learn to experience the internal light that is in everything.



So what is this light? And do we need a comet or star to find it? Maybe a recent experience of mine helps give a partial answer. Recently I was photographing a sunrise and I found myself on automatic pilot, getting remarkable photos without thinking about it; and when I put my camera down I continued to stare at the sunrise, seeing or sensing a glow from within it. I have sometimes experienced a similar glow or energy emanating from a tree or a mushroom or a bird I was photographing. Time stands still, my usual concerns and busy mind disappear, and the object or scene I am photographing permeates my consciousness with an ethereal inner light. The light of incarnation.

Richard Rohr says that when this happens it is God within us seeing the divine through our eyes. I like this metaphor: seeing God occurs when we see with God's eyes. The Magi had God eyes in Bethlehem. And you and I, perhaps with some help from a camera, can enter this way of seeing wherever we are.