

GEODES, EPIPHANY AND JESUS

I don't know where I've BEEN all my life, but do you realize that, UNTIL Carrie Newcomer came out with her latest CD, I never KNEW what a **GEODE** was. Do YOU know what a **GEODE** is? How MANY of you know what a **GEODE** is? I thought it was some kind ELECTRICAL piece on the engine of a car. You know: you just attach the ELECTRODE to the **GEODE**, and the car STARTS.... But THAT'S not what a *geode* is at ALL....

Let me SHOW what a **GEODE** is, just in case you're like ME, and never found OUT. In fact, let me PASS some **geodes** around. I BOUGHT these **GEODES** right across the street, on the corner of Main and Roxbury, in that little BEAD shop over there. I walked IN one day with my daughter, and there they WERE, a whole DISPLAY of them under a big SIGN that said: **GEODES**. It's strange: I'd never even HEARD of them until I heard Carrie Newcomer's SONG, and NOW all of a sudden, HERE they ARE, a whole DISPLAY of them! And do you SEE: they're like ROCKS made of DIRT. IF I'd ever FOUND one in the yard, I probably would have just TOSSED it away. But THAT would have been FOOLISH, because LOOK what's INSIDE! It's like CRYSTAL! And it's BEAUTIFUL! WHO would have THOUGHT?

Well, I'd like to play you a SONG that Carrie Newcomer wrote about **GEODES**. It's on her latest CD called, *The Geography of Light*. And I'm going to use a CD version of it, instead of singing it to you, because I want you to hear CARRIE sing it, and REALIZE that you DON'T want to MISS her CONCERT, which will be right HERE on Sunday, March 8th. I want you to hear HER sing it, and then get your TICKETS to the concert. SO, just sit back and listen to the song, **GEODES**. The words are PRINTED on an INSERT so that you can follow along.

GEODES

by Carrie Newcomer

Chorus: You can't always tell one from another.
And it's best not to judge a book by its tattered cover.
I have found when I tried or looked deeper inside.
What appears unadorned might be wondrously formed.
You can't always tell but sometimes you just know.

1. `Round here we throw geodes in our gardens.
] They're as common as the rain or corn silk in July.
Unpretentious browns and grays the stain of Indiana clay,
They're what's left of shallow seas glacial rock and mystery,
And inside, there shines a crystal bright as promise,
2. All these things that we call familiar,
Are just miracles clothed in the commonplace.
You'll see it if you try in the next stranger's eyes,
God walks around in muddy boots, sometimes rags and that's the truth,
You can't always tell, but sometimes you just know.
3. Some say geodes are made from pockets of tears,
Trapped away in small places for years upon years.
Pressed down and transformed, 'til the true self was born,
And the whole world moved on like the last notes of a song,
A love letter sent without return address.

Chorus: You can't always tell one from another.
 And it's best not to judge a book by its tattered cover.
 Now I don't open them to see folks 'round here just like me,
 We have come to believe there's hidden good in common things.
 You can't always tell but sometimes you just know.
 You can't always tell but sometimes you just know.

Isn't it a beautiful song? And the verse that I like the BEST is the SECOND verse, when Carrie sings: *All these things that we call FAMILIAR are just MIRACLES clothed in the COMMONPLACE. You'll SEE it if you try in the next stranger's EYES. God WALKS around in muddy BOOTS, and sometimes RAGS, and THAT'S the TRUTH. You CAN'T always TELL, but sometimes you just KNOW. I LOVE that verse, don't you?*

And friends, THAT'S what **EPIPHANY**, this HOLIDAY in the church, is all ABOUT! The Greek word, **EPIPHANY**, actually means, *to make MANIFEST or to REVEAL, to SHINE forth or to bring LIGHT to....* And Epiphany celebrates God's REVELATION of God's SELF, God's REVEALING of God's SELF to the GENTILES, to the NON-JEWISH world, IN and through those WISE men who came from the EAST, those PERSIANS from modern-day IRAQ and IRAN, those STAR-GAZERS, who FOLLOWED the STAR, who followed the LIGHT, and who came in search of a new KING.

Now, Bethlehem is just 5 miles South of Jerusalem, which in the time of Jesus, was the CAPITAL of Israel. SO, Bethlehem sort of lived in the SHADOWS of Jerusalem. But MORE than that: there WAS, in those days, OVERLOOKING the village of BETHLEHEM (and TODAY, its RUINS are STILL there), a HUGE and very plush PALACE called the **HERODIAN**. It was ONE of about 4 or 5 palaces throughout Israel that were BUILT and USED by King HEROD the Great, the man who was KING of Israel at the time of Jesus' BIRTH. And THIS palace, the **HERODIAN**, was Herod's FAVORITE of ALL his palaces! And we KNOW that because he CHOSE to be BURIED there. SO, just IMAGINE how BIG and plush and ORNATE the **HERODIAN** must have BEEN? In fact, it was SO big that it had a SWIMMING pool that was 140 feet long and 200 feet wide, almost the size of a modern-day FOOTBALL field, with an ISLAND in the middle of it. And so, with ALL this SPLENDOR -- the splendor of JERUSALEM, and the splendor of the **HERODIAN** -- IS it any WONDER that the WISE men would just ASSUME that the new KING, the one for whom they were SEARCHING, the one they'd seen represented in the STARS, would be BORN amidst ALL that SPLENDOR? Is it any WONDER they would just ASSUME that to be the case? And SO, they go FIRST to the palace of King Herod, either 5 miles away in Jerusalem, OR maybe the one that's just over the hill, the **HERODIAN**. But of course, they DON'T find the new King there. No, He's NOT there in the SPLENDOR of Herod's PALACE.

HOWEVER, think about how IRONIC it IS, that within SIGHT of Herod's PLUSH and beautiful PALACE -- within SIGHT of that huge SYMBOL of human POWER and GLORY, within SIGHT of that MIRACLE of human engineering -- there is a SMELLY and dirty STABLE, probably a CAVE in the rocks. There is a SMELLY and dirty STABLE, where ANIMALS are HOUSED for the NIGHT. And isn't it IRONIC that, IN that smelly and dirty STABLE, the wise men FIND the new KING for whom they have been SEARCHING? I mean: TALK about a **GEODE**! There's a beautiful CRYSTAL in that filthy little CAVE in the rocks! And the WISE men FIND it! Yes, they FIND the Holy CHILD, the new KING! And SO, they bow DOWN and offer their gifts, PRECIOUS gifts for a PRECIOUS child, PRECIOUS gifts for

a precious **GEODE**, that BEAUTIFUL crystal that is HIDDEN in the SAND and ROCK of the Judean WILDERNESS.

Yes friends, THAT is what *EPIPHANY* is all ABOUT! AS Carrie Newcomer sings: *MIRACLES are clothed in the COMMONPLACE! We'll SEE it if we TRY! God walks around in MUDDY boots, and sometimes RAGS, and that's the TRUTH. You CAN'T always TELL, but sometimes you just KNOW!* And when you DO know, it's PRECIOUS! It's SACRED! It's a GOD-MOMENT, isn't it?

Who KNEW that a young man in RAGS, looking for WEDDING clothes at a New York City CLOTHING bank would reveal GOD to my daughter on her high school MISSION trip? But Lyndsey FOUND a **GEODE**, a precious CRYSTAL, HIDING in the COMMONPLACE! And who KNEW that an OLD African-American woman would make manifest the Risen CHRIST to my WIFE, when after a day of WALKING in the *Great Peace March*, Diane would sit down EXHAUSTED in front of a HARLEM church, only to be approached by an old woman she'd never SEEN before? And that woman came up quietly, smiled at Diane, UNTIED Diane's shoes and took them OFF, and then softly began MASSAGING Diane's feet, like the SERVANT-KING washing the DUSTY feet of His disciples. Yes, HIDING in the ordinary, commonplace of an OLD tattered woman outside a Harlem church, Diane FOUND a **GEODE**, a precious CRYSTAL, who would touch Diane's life and faith VERY deeply!

And you know: the SAME thing happens to me sometimes. I mean: who KNEW that I would meet GOD, face-to-face, in an OLD man I was BAPTIZING on his DEATHBED, an old man who, in a SENSE, ended up baptizing ME? Come back NEXT Sunday and I'll tell you THAT whole STORY. But BELIEVE me when I SAY that I found a **GEODE**, I found a precious CRYSTAL hiding in the COMMONPLACE of a DYING man's TEARS!

And then, there were OTHER experiences where I found a **GEODE** in simple, ORDINARY people like Penny Cushman and Ray Phelps, Myrtle Watson and Don McColleston, John Zucchi and Roy Gelpke, Sally Visockis and Lorraine Bandy and SO many MORE. And in EACH and every ONE, I found a **GEODE**, a precious CRYSTAL, hiding in the ORDINARY, and the COMMONPLACE.

But for NOW, let me give you ONE more example. Who KNEW, as we were filming -- at my church in Connecticut -- a *PBS Holiday Special* featuring Noel Paul Stookey (of *Peter, Paul & Mary*) and Michael Kelly Blanchard -- who KNEW that my BEST friend would suddenly DIE at age 50? And who KNEW that I would be asked to OFFICIATE at his FUNERAL? They don't TELL you in SEMINARY that you'll be burying your FRIENDS, and how HARD it IS. And I was SO distraught that I felt PARALYZED! I didn't know what to SAY. NEVER before in my ministry had I ever FELT that sensation so STRONGLY. I'D officiated at funerals for teenagers and INFANTS, close RELATIVES, and a beautiful 2-year old. My own FATHER had died just a FEW weeks before, and I'd participated in HIS service! But NEVER in my ministry had I been rendered SPEECHLESS! And who KNEW, as I walked into the CHAPEL that morning to PRAY, that I would find Noel Paul STOOKEY sitting there in silence. And when he LOOKED at me, he said: *You look pretty upset, Gordon. What's going ON?* So I TOLD him what had happened, and that I was feeling PARALYZED and SPEECHLESS for the FIRST time in my entire MINISTRY. I said I KNEW they were COUNTING on me, because after all, we WERE best friends! Well, Noel stood up, HUGGED me close, and whispered: *Gordon, you CAN do this! Remember that YOUR job is NOT to be JESUS, but John the Baptist. YOUR job is NOT to HEAL these people, but to POINT them to the One who CAN heal them, to CHRIST. And Gordon, remember what we DO at COMMUNION, OK? We RE-MEMBER Jesus. We put Jesus*

*back together again with our MEMORIES! At the funeral, just help them **RE-MEMBER** your FRIEND, so that he will LIVE ON in and through all of YOU! Well, I KNEW that Noel was RIGHT! And suddenly I felt an INFUSION of STRENGTH to be John the Baptist. That's ALWAYS the role of a MINISTER, you know, though we SOMETIMES have a **MESSIAH COMPLEX**. WE'RE called to be John the BAPTIST, to POINT the WAY for people. SO, I LEFT the Chapel and within 15 MINUTES, I had my HOMILY written. And I REALIZED that, IN and through Noel Paul Stookey, GOD had SPOKEN to me, and was STRENGTHENING me. Here was a guy who, at THAT time, I didn't know very well, and thought I might NEVER see AGAIN. But he turned out to be a **GEODE**, a precious CRYSTAL! In HIM, God was HIDING in the ordinary! And I felt BLESSED to perceive it. Yes, WHAT a GIFT it WAS! My friends, **GEODES** are EVERYWHERE! As Carrie Newcomer sings: *All these things that we call FAMILIAR are just MIRACLES clothed in the COMMONPLACE. You'll SEE it if you try in the next stranger's EYES. God WALKS around in muddy BOOTS, and sometimes RAGS, and THAT'S the TRUTH. You CAN'T always TELL, but sometimes you just KNOW.* Amen.*