

Rare sightings: Matthew 3:13-17

by [Barbara Lemmel](#) in the [December 23, 1998](#) issue

The water flows cleanly here, just a few miles from the source of the Hudson River, deep in the Adirondack Mountains. The big puffs of foam that form on the surface of the water aren't evidence of agricultural runoff, but rather the result of rainwater leeching through the forest floor. One early summer morning, as I plied my fishing rod along the foggy river, I caught sight of what looked like just such a foam puff, a bit downstream. I didn't pay it much attention until I realized, almost subconsciously, that it was moving upriver. I stopped casting and turned to watch. Something was swimming slowly, determinedly, in my direction.

I stared for several minutes, trying to piece together the pink eyes, tiny round ears, short nose and white fur into a species that I recognized. Then, not ten feet from where I stood, the animal climbed up over a low rock and slid down the other side. There, unmistakably, was the wide flat tail of a beaver. Only this tail was pink. An albino beaver was making its steady, deliberate way up the current. I watched, transfixed, until it vanished around an upstream bend in the river. Only then did I realize I'd been standing with my jaw dropped in amazement.

I gave up on fishing and headed home. Over the next few hours I told as many people as I could find-my husband, the regional forest ranger, my environmentalist friend, a river guide, the town assistant who knew the local wild life. Had they ever seen such a thing as a white beaver? One after another answered no, he'd never seen one, though albino beavers could certainly exist. All of them envied me my experience. "I don't suppose you happened to have a video camera with you?" one asked. I didn't.

Dissatisfied, I tried to think of someone else to call. But I gradually realized there was no one who could corroborate my story. I was the only one out on the river at dawn on that cool, foggy morning, I was the only one who'd seen the white beaver. I'd have to be content with my own experience. But I wished I had company.

Epiphanies, both large and small, tend to be private events. Trying to share the details with another is fraught with complications; the words are never quite right,

and even the most sympathetic listener cannot fully bridge the gap between description and being there. No wonder most folks keep their personal experiences of the Holy to themselves. Who would believe it? And who would really understand? Ultimately, we must be satisfied with having had the experiences ourselves. But there's always the desire for companionship.

Many biblical epiphanies are private, too. According to Matthew, when Jesus rises, dripping, from the waters of the Jordan, John has moved on to the next baptism and the crowds are busy with repentance. Jesus alone sees the Spirit descending on wings of light to rest upon his soggy head. He alone hears the well-pleased voice of God calling him Beloved Son. The experience drives him out alone into the desert for 40 days to hone his calling. No wonder that when he returns to begin his ministry, one of his first actions is to call disciples. Enough solitude already. It's time for company.

True, the disciples will never manage to figure out for long just who this is that is leading them, despite a fair number of epiphanies of their own. They never really get it right until he's gone. There will be times when Jesus is so frustrated at their lack of understanding that a solo ministry looks appealing. But he keeps the company he's chosen. Though they cannot bridge the gap, the disciples do share the journey.

Christianity was never meant to be a solitary exercise, but trying to share our individual experiences of God is daunting. Trying to shape those who have had these experiences into a coherent Christian community is harder still, and more than one congregation has foundered and sunk under the strain of sorting out the personal and the corporate. The solo journey can look inviting.

The irony is that epiphanies are made for sharing, even as they are impossible to communicate wholly. The power of God's presence breaking into our everyday experiences is not to be kept to ourselves. It changes all our bearings, and we need help to chart our new course. It burns within our bones until we are weary with holding it in. Even if no one entirely understands, we have to try. And sympathetic though not quite comprehending company is better than none at all.

Perhaps in this season of God's revealing, so soon after the longest night of the year, the most essential work of the Christian community is to be company to one another in our epiphanies. Though we do not share the same experience, we share the same God. Or, if nothing else, we share the longing for God, and even that is enough. We may have to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling. But better to seek an

understanding of God's calling in our lives with the companionship of others who've engaged in the same struggle than to go our lonely and often misguided way. We may never quite bridge the gap that keeps us from fully understanding each other. But we can share the journey.