

*Gracious God, may roses of blessing spring from the cloak of Blessed Martin even as they sprang long ago from the tilma of Juan Diego, as proof of your powerful, expansive, and liberating love. By the power of your blessing open our hearts to the future you call us into, and lead us onward. And may the words of my mouth and the deep meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O God, who is our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Last week, after the 10:30 Eucharist, as I was greeting folks at the portico door, one of St. Martin's resident theologians--and the parish is gifted with several--called over the several heads between me and him and said, loudly, "Jim! You've they'd Jesus!" Not understanding them (and here I use them so as to obscure their identity a bit), I leaned toward them, saying, "What?" And they responded, louder still, "You have they'd Jesus!" Wanting to know more, I asked, "And?" And they simply smiled and gave me, over the intervening heads, an energetic thumbs up. "So, a good thing?" I asked. "Yes, a very good thing. Way overdue." And off they ambled to their next Sunday thing.

Earlier, other parishioners had greeted me at the terrace door. Several thanked me for my sermon and declared that it was "brave." "Brave?" I thought. How was that

sermon “brave”? That comment gave me pause. I thought that if telling the story of what happens when we open the gates of the American Broadway theater to a completely authentic Black family being crushed by the chimera, the myth of the American dream, in a way that allows us to experience more exactly what American racism looks and feels like when it’s lived out in an ordinary struggling, striving Black family, in the 1950’s or now, and then calling us all into an ever deeper Advent self-examination of our own iconic and lived expressions of that same everyday racism,--and to do that examination in the light of the expansive embracing cosmic love of God whose name is beyond all our naming, well, then, something, I thought, is amiss.

So I went back and read that sermon again, and again, and laid it up against the “theying” of Jesus that was included in the readings last week and that I talked about in the sermon. And I think now that what people thought was brave was my naming, and perhaps calling out, some the shibboleths of white American liberal Christian dogma, in which we proclaim inclusivity and welcome until we encounter in our own lives and in front of us on a page the preferred language of another set of America’s varied populace. In this case, we encountered, just briefly, the preferred language of those of us for whom the application of the male pronoun to Jesus--who is after all supposed to

be fully human, not just fully man--is problematic, or at least worth interrogating. And that examination is exactly what I invited you, and all of us, into. What I hoped for was the beginning of an enterprise of radical empathy. And conversation. Just a beginning.

So now, this little apologia. In the early times of the evolution of Christian dogma, a large bunch of theologians, all men and often incredibly at odds with one another, spent four or five centuries having it out about the nature of God, of the meaning, or even the possibility of a Triune God, of the nature of Jesus (fully God? fully human? both? If so, how?). All that enterprise was, when I was in seminary, wrapped up in what was called, non-ironically, patristics. And the patriarchs, the fathers of our faith, often wrote apologia. These were not apologies for their views so much as assertions of them, clothed in the guise of defenses of the faith. So, in that spirit, I offer this apologia.

First, the theying of Jesus is not dogma. It is not our practice. It is not a thing we will be doing often, very often, unless we decide we want or need to. It is, however, a way of offering into our viscera, into our guts, what it feels like not just to think of Jesus but to say Jesus, not as a "they" but as more than a man, as greater than a man. To think of Jesus as we say in *The Book of Common Prayer*

translation of the Nicene Creed we now use in the liturgy, as God who became fully human. To contemplate the notion that Jesus may have, almost certainly did have based on the little evidence we have, experienced his identity as very different from that of almost every single Jewish, or for that matter any man, in 1st century, Roman-ruled Palestine. So, the theying of Jesus is an invitation to think about how God--the infinite, inexpressible, bounteous, cosmic love and compassion that we call God--how in 2022, that God might find a home in a human body. Would God be more at home as a woman? Many would say, almost certainly. Would God be bound, though, by gender at all? Is God, in human form, gender binary, or might God express God's self into something more fluid, more non-binary, and in that way, more genuinely expansive and inclusive?

Second, they theying of Jesus is one way, perhaps, to embrace the language and lived experience of those of us who live in a white, heteronormative, largely still-patriarchal global and national culture and who, ourselves, are not one or more of those things and who therefore live always as strangers in a somewhat alien and strange land, no matter how hard we may try to assimilate, to imitate the cultural norms that can be so thoughtlessly cruel and often life-ending. Answer me this: what does it mean if, for just one Sunday morning, and that Sunday

being JKohn the Baptizer Sunday, we enter another culture and sit with another language, with words that more fully describe the experience of one who is “other,” and we find that so hard a thing to do that we instinctively recoil against it? How then, I guess I ask, in the words of the ancient prophets, will we do in the rising of the Jordan?

Which leads me finally away from apologia and into this morning of rose and roses and color and celebration, this wonderful, powerful day. Because today is, among other things, a profound meditation on what happens when God, today as an apparition of Mary, the mother of God, appears to a poor, struggling brown-skinned peasant Aztec man, the epitome of the “other” in relation to the dominant culture. This is a man who exists only very marginally in the newly established and massively inhumane and cruel hegemony of the Spanish conquerors of the indigenous people of Mexico, and who exists there only because he has forsaken the Gods of his own ancient people and converted to Catholicism rather than die. He stands exhausted, we may imagine, on a hill his people call Tepeyac, overlooking the nascent colonial capital. And there comes to visit him, in the original story (and this story, like the Gospel stories of Jesus, has many versions and is told and tamed and colonized across many

hundreds of years), an apparition of Mary who is clearly God and also clearly his kin, his blood.

She sends him on a mission into the heart of the conquering beast, the church, to convey God's command that the church build a shrine on the very spot where they stand together. Taking his life in hands, he goes to the Bishop and tells him of God's wish. The Bishop, of course, scoffs, and says what those in power always say: Prove it! Prove that you come from Mary to me? Show me a sign! Who do you think you are? Now, go! Get outa here!

So Juan Diego, as his name is called in the story, does go, back to the hill, and there, thank goodness, God as Guadalupe returns. She orders him to collect roses to decorate this barren hillside and then to return to the Bishop and tell him again what God says must be done. He spends who knows how long doing that, and then, even more fearfully returns to the Bishop, who we imagine is not at all pleased to have this scruffy peasant darkening yet again another day of his eminence. And Juan Diego opens his tilma, his cloak, and dozens and dozens and dozens of roses fall from it, revealing imprinted there in the fabric of that poor man's garment the image of God, Mary, a brown-skinned Aztec Mary, surrounded and magnified

by stars, by all the stars of all the heavens of all the universes of all the cosmoses of God.

And so today we bring our roses to God's feet, and look to the boundless cosmos which is always held, and we with it, in the cosmic embrace of God's love, and we ask for the strength and the courage to talk across all the things that divide us, that might, were we not God's people, wrench us from one another, tear us again asunder. We know those roses, some of them, have thorns that bite through their loveliness. We know our journey with and into God may sometimes take us beyond our places of comfort. We also know that we must follow, just as Juan Diego did, where God will lead us, does lead us, and that we will arrive and that there, all will be well, and all manner, all manner of thing shall be well.

I pray you, let us walk together in the infinitude of the Light of God. Amen.