

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10: 34-43
Matthew 3: 13-17

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St. Martin in-the-Fields
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Year A

One Wild Ride

Holy One, in the silence name me, that I may know who I am, hear the truth you've put into me, and trust the love you have for me, which you call me to live out.¹ Amen

“One wild ride” are not words we usually think of in terms of the Lectionary. But the two weeks between Christmas and today are the exception. On Christmas a mere 14 days ago, I preached about being awestruck at the manger by the preposterous miracle of Jesus's birth. I could have stayed there for a while, a long while, taking it all in and asking myself how to live it all out.

Twelve days later, on the Feast of the Epiphany which we celebrated here on Friday night, we reveled in the story of the three wise men – possibly astrologers-who followed the star to the baby Jesus. But before they set out, they visited King Herod—who unbeknownst to them was already terrified by the threat this newborn posed to him. The wise men promised to report back about the baby's whereabouts.

After bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to baby Jesus and awestruck by the experience, each of the three wise men had the same dream that night—a dream warning them not to return to Jerusalem because Herod was planning to kill the baby. They were admonished to go “home by another way” which they did. Joseph, too, had a dream, warning him to flee to Egypt with Jesus and Mary, because Herod was plotting to kill him.”

It was a prophetic dream. Matthew's gospel says that realizing he'd been duped, Herod ordered the death of every child in Bethlehem under the age of two—a murderous rage believed to have killed dozens, maybe hundreds of infants and toddlers, known to us today as the “Holy Innocents” -- the church's first martyrs. Rachel, one of the mothers' whose children were murdered, “wept and refused

¹Loderr, Ted, “In the Silence Name Me,” *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*

to be consoled” – a bitter and honest depiction of parental loss which remains unchanged in two thousand years.

It has then been a very wild ride that brings us to day fourteen today. Jesus is suddenly 30 years old. We meet him as an adult for the first time in scripture at the banks of the Jordan River where he stands among the crowds, before plunging in to the muddy waters to be baptized by his cousin John. We are off and running into Epiphany, the brief time in the liturgical calendar between Christmas and Lent.

As I paused and try to fathom these past two weeks, I realize I’m still as awestruck as I was at the manger – except that there’s more to contemplate. more gifts to unwrap.

Epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning “appearing or revealing.” It’s worth noting that the three wise men— who follow a bright and blinding star— were not Jews—which helps affirm that when God revealed himself in Jesus as the savior of the world— it was not just for some but for all. There was no deciding about who’s in and who’s out.

As theologian Barbara Brown Taylor writes, in her luminous children’s book, *Home by Another Way*:²

The star was so bright that none of them (the three wise men) could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were wise enough to know that it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.

Now there’s an invitation if I ever heard one. Epiphany calls us to choose to follow the star when it appears in the skies of our lives. I’m convinced there are moments in every life when something calls and tugs, an insistent nudge towards the next right thing. Maybe it’s a large change, maybe small. Maybe it feels impossible, maybe not, the point is, it’s there.

The choice is whether or not we follow it. What is the tug you have been waiting for—or ignoring-- all your life? Can you take a step in that direction? If you need a starting place, think of how you will bring Christ’s light into this world. We don’t know how the Wise Men changed, but we do know they went home by

²Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Home by Another Way*, Flyaway Books, Louisville, KY, 2018

another way. Don't wait for a destination, turn, change directions, go by another way and follow your star. It's been described as like driving in a snowstorm with your headlights on—you may only see 18 inches in front of the car, but it's enough to get you to where you're going. I think most spiritual journeys start like that. Start somewhere. You may not have revelatory dreams, or mystical visions, but surely you have intuition or thoughts like "What if I did this? What if I tried that?" Wherever you start, know that God is with you.

This is the great gift of Jesus's baptism. Writes author and theologian Debie Thomas:

Whatever else Jesus's baptism story is it is first and foremost a story of the sacred ordinary. That is, it's a story of profound humility. The holy child conceived of the Holy Spirit, celebrated by angels, worshiped by shepherds and feared by Herod, stand in the same muddy waters we stand in. The Messiah's first public act is a declaration of solidarity. God is one of us... Jesus's first public act is an act of alignment. Of radical and humbling joining. His first step is towards us.³

And are you willing to step towards him? I remember one 6-year-old patient at the hospital who was speaking to me in Arabic as her mother translated. I asked her about God, or Allah, and she responded firmly and fast, "When you go walking towards God, he comes running to you."

But we have to take that first step. And it doesn't matter if it's a misstep at first, you can try again. Why? Because the great gift of Jesus's baptism is the steadfast and unyielding affirmation that when dove descended and the heaven's opened, the voice that spoke about Jesus as God's beloved, spoke to us as well.

In his book *The Life of the Beloved*, the great Catholic theologian Henri said:

I want you to hear that voice, too. It is not a very loud voice. It comes from a very deep place and it says, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand, and I hold you safe in the shade

³Thomas, Debie, "Journey with Jesus," A weekly webzine for the global church, January 6th, 2019

of my embrace. You belong to Me and I belong to you. Trust that you are the beloved. This is who you truly are.”⁴

This may be the only New Year’s resolution worth making; “trust that you are the beloved” because this is who you truly are.

And if you are feeling beleaguered in the beloved dept, stick around St. Martin’s because we believe you’re beloved, too. And together we can work and pray our way into bringing Epiphany’s light out into our beleaguered world to shine more brightly than ever before. Amen and Amen.
