

First Sunday after the Epiphany-Baptism of Jesus-Year B-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 1.7.24

Epiphany 1B: Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 29, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

We are mid-step, still in this once-in-a-blue moon season. All through December, with only three weeks between the start of Advent until Christmas Eve, I thought, "Once we are on the other side of Christmas, we'll be able to relax and breathe and slow down the pace." But, I forgot to look closely at the calendar. Because last Sunday was our only Sunday celebration of the Christmas season this year. Usually we get two weeks, but not this year. Not only that, but Epiphany was yesterday, so the magi came and went this season without fanfare. We've consistently had one foot in one season and the other foot in another season: first Advent and Christmas, then Christmas and Epiphany, and now, Epiphany and Jesus' baptism. And to make it even more confusing, this is the third time in just five weeks that we've heard some version of John the Baptist out in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance with water. If it sounds like you just heard this gospel, that is why. (Advent II, Advent III and now today).

We are mid-step and before we take the next step, it seems worthwhile to stop in our tracks, to mark the Epiphany. The magi have been making their way along the ridge of the nave, by the lights, since Christmas Eve (thanks to Brian Avila). Rather than leave them stuck in limbo for a year, it seems only good and right that we have at least one Sunday with them down here, gathered round the baby Jesus, before the entire crèche gets packed away. So before we take the next step, one foot is still with them. As they set forth on their journey to find the baby. As they were called to a secret meeting with King Herod and told to report back to him as soon as they knew more. As they followed the star to its resting place and were overwhelmed with joy. As they presented those strange gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh and knelt down before the child and then, after a dream, as they decided to not report back to Herod, but rather to return home by another way.

I wonder what they saw that changed them. It's such a small detail, but this year, I find my feet tripping over this phrase in that story that we didn't hear just now, but still have one foot in: *When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.* They experienced mighty joy before they ever saw Jesus. It seems so pivotal. What's it about? What did they see in the star? It's almost as though there was a pre-Epiphany epiphany. A pre-Epiphany *aha!* Even before they met Jesus or decided to bypass Herod. I wonder if what they saw in the star was not just the light of the world, but the warmth of the world. What if what they saw in the star is that they were beloved. And that their belovedness wasn't dependent on them. It wasn't dependent on what they discovered inside the manger. It wasn't dependent on any future actions on their part. The result of that epiphany, the Epiphany, of being beloved: overwhelming joy.

Many years ago, I received a Christmas card with a painting on the front of the desert landscape at night, punctuated by twinkling stars. The magi with their camels were making their way across the desert, silently, one behind the other, headed away from the big, bright star. I remember thinking, "What a beautiful depiction. They are headed in the wrong direction." It was sent as a Christmas card, but it was really a card for this

particular day: the day after the Epiphany. Because inside, the message of the card very simply read, *May we be changed by what we have seen.* The day after Epiphany, heading out and away from the Nativity, is a different journey. *May we be changed by what we have seen.*

Change is not something that most human beings thrive on. Human capacity for adaptation is remarkable, but change is hard. (You might have heard the saying, *No one likes change except a baby with a wet diaper.*) And so it is very interesting to shift our balance to the other foot, the one standing out in the wilderness, yet again, with John the Baptist. John the Baptist is all about change. Repent means change your mind, change your heart, turn away from that (non-compassionate ways) towards this (life-giving ways of the liberating God). If anyone in the gospels is known for his tough love, change or die approach, it is John the Baptist! (He's consistently intriguing, but most of us don't aspire to emulate his lifestyle.) In that context, in the midst of John's repeated calls for repentance, Jesus goes into the river to be baptized by John. And there is another Epiphany. This time, the Epiphany isn't the Magi's *aha* moment. It's Jesus's. Different moment. Same deep Epiphany. *You are my Son, the Beloved.* Jesus's Epiphany that he was beloved. Jesus's *aha*. That (like the Magi) he didn't need to change anything in order to be God's beloved child. That he didn't need to do anything in his work or ministry ahead in order to achieve that status. Once again, the Epiphany that being beloved is the starting place.

If we take one or two steps back to Genesis, which we get only the briefest of glimpses today, at every turn, in every moment of that creation story, with every action and breath, God says, *ALL of this is good. Very good. Holy. Cherished. Pleasing. Beloved.* And in a moment we'll be taking a few steps forward to renew our own baptismal vows. Epiphanies are sometimes described as a revealing of what is most true, at the heart of the universe. At every turn, at every moment, the Baptismal Covenant, is an affirmation of this most true Epiphany: You are beloved. It doesn't actually matter what liturgical season we're in. This is the Epiphany: *You are Beloved.*

Jan Richardson is an artist whose life work is to offer blessing through visual art and words. One of her Epiphany blessings, *Where the Map Begins.* You will note that it is not a blessing about slowing down the pace after Christmas. It is more about next steps the day after the Epiphany.

Where the Map Begins

This is not
Any map you know.
Forget longitude. Forget latitude.
Do not think of distances Or of plotting
The most direct route.
Astrolabe, sextant, compass:
These will not help you here.

This is the map that begins with a star.

This is the chart that starts with fire,
With blazing,
With an ancient light
That has outlasted generations, empires,
Cultures, wars.

Look starward once,
Then look away.
Close your eyes
And see how the map
Begins to blossom
Behind your lids,
How it constellates,
Its lines stretching out
From where you stand.

You cannot see it all,
Cannot divine the way
It will turn and spiral,
Cannot perceive how
The road you walk
Will lead you finally inside,
Through the labyrinth
Of your own heart
And belly
And lungs.
But step out
And you will know
What the wise who traveled
This path before you
Knew:
The treasure in this map
Is buried
Not at journey's end
But at its beginning.