

The Sunday of the Epiphany, January 6, 2019. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

So who's going to win the Superbowl? There's a group of football fanatics out there who actually don't care. They're the ones who play Fantasy Football. As *Fantasy Football for Dummies* says, "*Fantasy football lets you try your skills as a fantasy owner. After you join a league, you scout for and draft players, compete against other fantasy owners, and use all your skills to win the championship.*" The Fantasy Footballer doesn't care about teams – except, of course, the one they've drafted. As one player noted online, nothing – not even the real thing, the NFL – holds a candle to Fantasy Football. One word sums it up: "Obsession." This player was writing about how he discovered how difficult it is to balance real life with Fantasy Football. And that's just one part of the fantasy game industry.

Here's another titbit: back in 2015, when Universal Studios' opened their "Harry Potter" attraction at their Orlando Theme Park, their profits went up 38%. One news item reported an interview with a returning visitor who said that it was only when he first visited "Hogwarts" that he felt fully alive, so he'd been back every week ever since.

Disneyworld and Disneyland – and all the other theme parks have similar folk – for instance, a friend of mine in Bloomington, IN – a surgeon – owns a condo right next to Disneyworld and goes down there five or six times a year.

Extreme responses? Tell that to the 20 million who went to a Universal Studios park in 2017, or the 150 Million who went to a Disney theme park in 2017! Or the 75 million who played Fantasy Football in 2015; or the 1.3 billion people worldwide who were playing computer games in 2013 – not 2018/19; 2013! Fantasy is big business!!

Through sports, and TV, and theme parks, and Smart Phones and other technology we're offered alternate realities, experiences, products, all of which can be positive experiences in our lives, even the fantasy: healthy escapism can get you through the day, and many psychologists are now saying that there are some significant positive benefits to a healthy fantasy life.

But what if – aided by what one scholar (Mark Markuly) has called the "Merchants of Make Believe" – all this crosses a line; what if it's functioning only to help us avoid the hard truths of the real, physical world? That's what Stephen Spielberg's recent movie "Ready Player One" suggests. And the thing is, it's no longer a "what if?" question. Compulsive Video-Gaming is making its way into the DSM – The "Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders," which is used by clinicians and psychiatrists to diagnose psychiatric illnesses, as a major psychological problem.

And there's another facet to this: a retreat into distraction and fantasy can only go so far. Today it's increasingly apparent that this escapism and fantasy are no longer capable of counteracting an increasingly dark and challenging world, one increasingly filled with broken promises and unrealized hopes.

We're living in a time where there's a growing gap between what we hope from life and what we actually experience. Certainly over the last 50 years, the idea of "the American Dream" has crashed and burned. Unfulfilled promises, subtle manipulation, and overt lying have demoralized and disheartened many.

The next step is anger. All of a sudden, we get angry! It's impossible to miss how angry many people are at the moment? This year, even the "Holiday Season" didn't make much of a dent.

Understanding our anger is very important. This anger didn't come out of nowhere! For the last 40-odd years, scholars - psychologists in particular - have been studying the story of anger from a somewhat different perspective than you might expect.(cf. Dean Mark Markuly's column from Seattle University's College of Theology and Ministry).

It turns out that up until the late '70's most psychologists believed anger was a primitive emotion from our evolutionary past with no real benefits. Sound about right to you? Then along came one psychologist – James Averill – who changed the narrative. He took an interest in what he described as "the positive attributes of anger," (per Markuly), and found that anger is more gift than curse. *"It makes us feel powerful over our challenges, helps us solve problems, opens space for more honest conversation with people who have shut us out or not taken us seriously, and makes us more willing to accommodate others. Anger changes how we relate to one another."* (Ibid). 15 years later scholars from multiple disciplines were publishing 25,000 studies on anger each year, including neuroscientists, who observed our brains on anger look a lot like our brains on happiness.

Anger has more than one face. Ordinary anger can shift under the right circumstances into another, second mode: that of "moral indignation" – righteous anger – which can become a "powerful force for good." If you think of religious figures like Harriet Tubman, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., controlled and focused anger was a part of who they were and what they achieved. Their anger was a driving force behind their successful work for positive social and political change, because it grounded that anger in familiar religious symbols and sentiments.

This is mostly not the anger some – many – are feeling today, however. Unfortunately, there's a third mode to anger, a combination, really. If moral indignation persists and people with righteous rage don't believe their anger is helping to bring about changes in heart and social and political structures, then that anger rots and becomes diseased, and infects its host just as if it were a virus. Instead of searching for common solutions and seeking accord, this sort of anger's all about "a desire for revenge against our enemies." Combine that with the failure of our distracting fantasy worlds to counteract our feelings of powerlessness, and you have a potent combination that both shortens our individual 'fuses,' and increases the 'yield' of our explosions.

The harsh reality is that much of our culture has reached this third stage, mostly with the assistance of those "Merchants of Rage" (Markuly) who see in this sort of anger a self-focused and self-centered opportunity to manipulate and profit – personal, financial, political. These are the purveyors of fake news, alternate facts, and post-truth, and all the other lies that distort our cultural, shared reality for their benefit.

Our culture's obsession with fantasy has corroded all of our abilities to discern fact from fiction, leaving us open to dysfunction's corrosive manipulation, allowing anger to move from a fruitful resource to a destructive cancer.

Fantasy and anger: they lead us to an interesting, challenging place as people of faith, on this day when we remember a fantastic story about mobile monarchs, a moveable star, and a mystical baby. Here's the other side of the story I've just walked us through; our side of the story.

I believe this Epiphany story – and the bigger story of our faith that lies behind it – are gifts to us in the face of these challenges of escapism and anger. Mirroring the gifts of the Magi, I believe there are three gifts in particular:

First, our faith is rooted in reality, not in fantasy. The biblical stories are based on real events, about actual people, who lived truly remarkable, transformative lives. The truth these stories and people convey isn't always literal – the gospel writers were masters at conveying Truth (with a capital "T") through metaphors they never intended for us to take literally. As the great British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, said, "The world is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper" – to have an epiphany. In that context, today's story says this: creation lights the way into the future, inviting us to "Light tomorrow with today!" as Elizabeth Barrett Browning said. And "the end of all our exploring Will be to arrive where we started And know the place for the first time." (T.S. Eliot); in the end, all human wisdom will come to worship at the birth of the Divine.

And our faith doesn't make false or hollow promises to us. Despite what the purveyors of the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" might say – there's no "get rich quick" scheme here, no easy, trouble-free life. What our faith does promise is that in the story of Jesus, God has provided us with a living symbol of divine compassion and love, and – through the gift of the Holy Spirit – God has shown us that our Creator makes the hard journey beside us through the challenges – and joys – of life.

And our faith promises something else, too: that we *can* find joy, peace, and love; we *can* find a contentment that can't ultimately be undermined, or shown to be empty. We don't find them through escapism or fantasy; we find those things by living selfless lives in the real, physical world, by seeking to be in meaningful relationship with others, by being a part of and supporting a community of like-minded people – like this one – that's committed to those things, those values.

And that, in the end, is the answer to anger. The gift of faith is to offer us a way past that 3rd stage, or perhaps, back from it, so that we can keep the righteous fires stoked, keep the struggle for justice alive, while also respecting those with whom we disagree, inviting them into the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

"How wonderful it is," Anne Frank wrote, "that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." Now that's a new year's resolution worth trying to keep!