

A 1 Epiphany 2026
Saint Barnabas's Church, Falmouth MA
The Rev. David M. Rider
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Matthew 3: 13-17

I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a bit of spiritual whiplash

Just last Sunday, we heard baby Jesus cooing in the manger while entertained by exotic, gift-giving magi from a foreign land—yet today we encounter the adult Jesus and his eccentric cousin John arm wrestling over who will baptize whom

Before we finished off the holiday eggnog, America intervened into Venezuela with audacious plans to control its oilfields

In the midst of this mayhem, Renee Nicole Good, a young mother of three, a poet and faithful Christian, was fatally shot in her car by ICE agents near her Minneapolis home

It makes me long for another round of Silent Night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...

As we live into the weeks of the Epiphany season, let's remind ourselves that its overarching theme points to the revelation of Jesus to the world with manifest courage and possibility

Epiphany season challenges us to make a bold witness that we worship a God of hospitality, abundance, and limitless love, even in the face of mayhem and gratuitous violence

On Christmas morning, I was honored to preside at our Eucharist, after which I made my way to Logan Airport for a rendezvous with extended family in Minneapolis, a city near where I went to college and have enjoyed family connections ever since

As my plane landed, I remembered the George Floyd tragedy, said a little prayer that the city had healed, and then jumped into holiday celebration

What could go wrong?

We've been through another traumatic week that has torn at the frayed fabric of our nation

Our senses have been assaulted by horrific video feeds, and we have grappled with the fatal shooting of Renee Good during an encounter with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Minneapolis

Renee Good was a human being, created in the image of God. She was the mother of three, who felt called to protect her immigrant neighbors—she carried a whistle when others carried guns

While details of her death are unique, they follow a trajectory in our culture that puts us at risk for normalizing acts of aggression and gratuitous violence

In a Wednesday Facebook post, Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota Craig Loya connected his local tragedy to our Epiphany season:

As people of the Epiphany, in the midst of a world where cruelty tries to pose as power, we continue to rejoice in the assurance that absolute and final power resides in poor and crucified Jesus, who alone is the true king.

Our Epiphany joy is not some naive and shallow notion that everything will be ok, when everything is so obviously not ok.

Our Epiphany joy is the deep, defiant, revolutionary hope we have in the assurance that love is the most powerful force in the universe.

Our response to this week's tragedy also informs our reading of Jesus's baptism as we begin the Epiphany season

It's a bold and simple story, including the subliminal rivalry between two young-adult cousins, John and Jesus

For my money, the sleeper sentence is the final quotation, which is not from Jesus or some great prophet, but God as Godself

Scripture often has someone paraphrasing or intuiting the word of God, but rarely do we get God in quotation marks

To repeat verse 17: And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Happily, most of us have been baptized into this holy mystery and commit to daily prayer and reflection regarding ways to become followers of Jesus and agents of God's reconciling grace

Ever since Jesus dried himself off from the River Jordan, this spiritual journey takes place not in some spiritual cocoon but, rather, amid the demons, pagan excesses, joys and stresses of daily life

Remember that the most common earthly-ministry stories of Jesus involve his wrangling with demons and casting off the bedeviling forces that overwhelm wretched, broken souls

As we experienced so palpably this week, we are navigating a wild-west, rough-and-tumble world as we live into 2026, and we have no light at the end of a tunnel to guide us

So what does Christian witness bring to this cultural dumpster fire?

The answer may resemble a multi-layered cake, so let's taste a couple layers to start

Today's Sunday Forum discussed Saint Augustine's reflections on the spiritual cost of collective violence when anger becomes the rage

Augustine, who was a testosterone-drenched *bon vivant* in his younger years, points to the young Alypius, who sought to be upright but was dragged by his peers to the cruel gladiator games of 4th century pagan Rome

Alypius metaphorically and literally closed his eyes to protect his innocence until the crowd roared in delight at the site of a gored gladiator

When Alypius instinctively raised his eyelids, Augustine writes, Alypius imbibed the madness and was never the same

As the French like to say, the more things change, the more they stay the same

In our many group and individual conversations at StB's, two thought clouds intersect with some frequency:

1) We live in a crazy world

2) I am not getting any younger in this aging body

Amid these realities, individual and group prayer remains a core part of our spiritual discipline, so in the coming months I want us to experiment with fresh forms of centering prayer and meditation to which we invite our surrounding community

We will harness our soon-to-be renovated chapel as the epicenter for this spiritual practice and wellness opportunity

Concurrently, we will address social justice and our deep commitment to proclaim God's reconciling and occasional tough love and public witness to a broken world

Next weekend, for example, Canon Jean Baptiste Ntagengwa will lead a Saturday pizza-dinner discussion on Massachusetts immigration ministry while serving as our preacher and forum speaker on Sunday of the Martin Luther King weekend

Augustine's story about Alypius reminds us that we cannot blindfold ourselves to the pagan excesses of our culture, and we must help our children and grandchildren to move from the innocence of youth to the rigors of adulthood

We breathe the air of our larger culture, including its impurities

We know the Promised Land is far off and not likely obtained in our lifetimes

In the meantime, what new forms of ministry is God calling us as we navigate this beautiful, terrible, wonderful world?

How do we support and love each other in new ways, and how do we speak hope to a culture flirting with nihilism?

In light of this week's chaotic events, our bishop, Julia Whitworth reminds us: "I urge you to take every precaution for your own safety and the safety of others. Choose nonviolence and mutual care. The call to courage is never a call to recklessness. Christ calls us to meet violence and hate with love.... Now is the time to remember again that perfect love casts out fear."

In the weeks ahead, let's renew our efforts to care for each other with Christ-like love, recognizing that each of us navigates these turbulent times in unique ways

Let's deepen our resolve to stare down violent force with the unstoppable power of God's love as an active of Christian witness

In doing so, we manifest God's reconciling love in this hurting world.