

Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story
Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Sunday after Epiphany
Woodbury UMC
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Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
You have no control
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?

These words come up more than once if you've seen the play *Hamilton*, for the first time when the singer is relatively young, and the last time after the singer has died. That singer is not Alexander Hamilton, but we see time and again that Hamilton himself very much realizes who tells your story is important. At the climax of the very first song in the play, characters call out:

We, fought with him
Me, I died for him
Me, I trusted him
Me, I loved him

You would have to imagine that each of these would give you a very different perspective on what really happened, from their point of view, given their circumstances, given the story *they* wanted to tell. The final song speaks of his legacy that in the end is out of his control. The worth of a human being is decided after their death by people and events they have no agency over.

I thought about this a lot as I pondered the lectionary readings for this week. In Acts, we have the story of the early church, told from someone who was claimed to be writing a true chronicle of all the things that had been said around Jesus, who had already written

the gospel of Luke and was now continuing the story. That is a big deal! Where you **begin** the story matters, and where you **end** the story matters. Mark begins his gospel with the adult Jesus being baptized, while the other three start before his birth, and one of them even starting at the dawn of creation.

Why is it that we just spent a major season of the church calendar looking at the nativity and all around it, while completely ignoring two of the four Gospels? Well, it is because of the type of story we are trying to tell, right? We want to focus on the birth of Jesus, so we start with everything that comes right before that, and end with everything predating his adulthood, so we keep the focus where we want it.

Last week, I spoke about the story of the magi, as told in Matthew's gospel — it doesn't appear anywhere else. I spoke of the wonder and awe of the discovery of the birth of the infant king, of the supernatural star that portended all that would happen, that even led them to the spot. I told of how they had a dream tell them to take a different way home. That ends scripture as it is listed in the lectionary, so that's where we focused. I preached on the importance of being open to going home by another way, to standing up and taking risks on behalf of others. I shared that message with you because I believe it, very strongly, and I pray that it inspires you to also take risks on behalf of others for what is right. If you read this in your Bible, you will see that the next 6 verses tell of the anger of Herod, of Joseph being warned to take his family and flee the country in order to escape the mass murder of babies and infants that is about to happen. Not very Christmas-sy, not inspiring awe in the way the magi account does, but instead it is full of rage, and terror, and sorrow. By not telling that part of the story, we forget that following the will of God may have great consequences. That even doing the right thing can have a terrible price to pay, whether someone else ends up paying — as happens with the magi — or if you yourself pay the price for obedience to God.

But that was last week, and this is a new week. We have the account of the baptism of Jesus. Didn't we just read this about four weeks ago? Didn't I just preach on this? And yet here it is in the lectionary once again. Why? I don't honestly know. But context matters. Maybe we will get something different out of this story during Advent and the excitement leading up to Christmas than we will by hearing about it now, in this season of Epiphany.

John has been preaching that the Kingdom of God is near, to repent of your sins and to follow God, and so Jesus responds and at his baptism we are told that the Holy Spirit

descended on him in bodily form. Offhand I don't know if that is the only place that the Holy Spirit is described as coming as a physical being, but it is one of very few. We are led to believe that what is happening here is really important, and to marvel at the anointing on Jesus as he is ready to begin his work. It is a good, brief, powerful story. But you will notice that even though it seems to flow pretty naturally, there is a section in the middle that we are instructed to skip, verses 18 through 20. What happens there?

And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

Parents — if you asked your child how they were doing, and they told you what they did over their Christmas break, Oh, it was great, I did some volunteer work for my church that got a lot of attention, and later you realized that they left out the part about being locked up in prison? You might feel that this was important information that was missing, important information that affected how you heard the rest of their story! This part was missing from the Advent account, and it is missing today. Why would something so seemingly important be left out? Those few lines tell an awful lot about what is going on. They say that John proclaimed good news to the people, and exhorted them. We don't use that word much these days, it means to strongly encourage — so he gave people good news and strongly encouraged them. Then he told the local governor that it was not ok that he had married his brother's wife, and Herod responds by throwing John in prison. And then we get back to the story.

I have two points I want to make with you today, and both of them hinge on this part of the scripture that was cut out. For one, John goes to prison for speaking truth to power. The entire career of Jesus is speaking truth to power, and this incident with John foreshadows how bolder and bolder speaking truth to power will end both of their lives. The gospel writer says quite boldly that Herod has done evil, that he continued to do evil, and that imprisoning John was yet another evil act. It is put to us as clearly as is possible — John may be going to prison, but John isn't the one committing an evil act, Herod is. John is proclaiming repentance of sin and obedience to God, and John pays a price for that, and when all is done he has paid with his life for calling out wrongdoing.

My point is that the story of John is exciting and inspiring, the story of the magi is filled with awe and wonder — but **both of them are stories of bold action with no consequences**. If you want to live as a disciple of Christ, I don't see any way of doing so authentically without being willing to risk the consequences. In the case of the magi, others received the consequences. In the case of John, he bore the consequences. Both as a result of obedience to God.

Two or three years ago, our Bishop led a project to clearly articulate who we are and what we stand for, unveiled as our Mission, Vision, and Core Values. I will have much more to say about these during Lent, but for now I want to highlight the Vision of our New York Annual Conference:

We see strong leaders who develop vital congregations that eagerly make new disciples, actively nurture existing disciples, and passionately advocate for the needs and concerns of all people.¹

Making and nurturing disciples, we know how that works, in worship, small groups, and conversations, and Bible study. Passionately advocating for the needs and concerns of all people — some people are not comfortable with the idea of a church advocating for the needs and concerns of all people, but that is the example of John, and that is the example of Jesus. Help people when you can, but speak out against structures and systems that keep on hurting people in the first place. That is core to who we are, core to being a Christ-follower. This has consequences, and if you study scripture while skipping over all the consequences, you risk misunderstanding much of what it means to follow Jesus.

That is one point, here is the other. Read that Gospel section again, with the missing part included. John is put in prison, and only after John is in prison is Jesus baptized. So — did the author mess up? Did no one edit this Gospel? How does John baptize Jesus while he is locked up in prison?

The answer is simple. Stop reading your Bible literally. Then look again, without reading it literally, and see the writer is telling us something incredibly important. John exhorts the

¹ <https://www.nyac.com/our-mission-vision-and-core-values>

crowds, telling them to repent and speaking truth to power. Herod throws the baptist in prison. **Jesus is baptized anyway.** Herod could not stop it, and we have a powerful reminder that God is more powerful than Herod.

Without this, we read that John proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom, and that Jesus responded by being baptized and beginning his ministry.

With it, the message of this little story becomes something else:

We are told that the forces of this world will action against those who speak truth to power, and while that is the power of the world, it is unable to stand against the power of God.

Amen.