

Defying Gravity

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I went to a matinee this week. After being shaken down 30 plus dollars for a medium diet coke, medium popcorn, 3D glasses and a ticket and almost 30 minutes of previews, the feature film, WICKED, began.

Wicked tells the story of the unlikely friendship between Elphaba and Glinda, and their eventual paths as the Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda the Good: Elphaba, is a young woman with green skin who discovers her true power, and Glinda, a popular young woman who discovers her true heart meet when they attend Shiz University in the Land of Oz. Their friendship is tested after an encounter with the Wizard of Oz, and their lives take different path.

The best part of the story is when Elphaba and Glinda arrive at the Emerald City, and hear the history of Oz in the soaring music of the song, One Short Day. Long ago, two beings known as The Magical Wise Ones lived in Oz. They were beloved and revered, and Oz was a happy place. As they approached their deaths, the Magical Wise Ones recorded their magical secrets in a book written in a secret language, the Grimmerie. Over time, those who could read the Grimmerie died off, and Oz fell into a period of unrest. No one in Oz could utilize the magical capabilities of the Grimmerie. There was a great prophecy of the arrival of a Special One who would be able to read the Grimmerie and unlock its magical secrets, thus bringing peace to Oz. In the meantime, The Wizard has become a charlatan ruler of Oz, He maintains his control by hiding away in his castle in the Emerald City, and only speaks through smoke and fire behind a big scary golden head. He works to maintain his control of Oz by starting a hate campaign against the animals, who are a threat to his rule. Elphaba, it turns out, is the Special One who can read the Grimmerie. The Wizard wants to use Elphaba's magic to cement his power as the King of Oz, the savior of the city.

It seems that for ages the human race seeks saviors. Today we celebrate Epiphany, which is really about the wonder of God becoming manifest in the person of Jesus. The signature story of Epiphany is in the gospel of Matthew, where an obscure religious sect following a ball of fire in the sky to its resting place, where they believed they would find a savior of the world.

You know, the Three Kings of Orient Are. Three, because of the three gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh. However, the gospel account never mentions three kings at all, but rather "Magi" of undertermined number and gender. The term Magi is a plural form of magoi in Greek language, which means Zoroastrian priests—women and men—from Persia. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world which is still active in Iran today.

The primary prophet for Zoroastrianism is Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe that he was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. Like Jesus,

Zoroaster started his ministry at age of 30 after he defeated all Satan's temptations. He predicts that "other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded." Zoroastrian priests believed that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior.

When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, the Holy City, the most likely place for a Messiah to be born, they instead came face to face with King Herod, a narcissist despot with an inferiority complex, who knew nothing about a new king and was immediately threatened. He told them to go and find the newborn King and then tell him where they found him. The Magi realized they were about thirteen miles off in their seeking, but continued to trust in the mystery of the stars and dreams. Upon finding the savior they were seeking in Bethlehem, didn't seem to be bothered it was a baby born to a poor family in a backwater town outside of Jerusalem, the holy city. They still offered the child their opulent gifts, and didn't protest against the thought of an impoverished savior sleeping in a feed trough, stinking of animal dung and buggy straw hiding snakes and mice. And when they were warned in a dream to go home by another road, and disregard the evil Herod's demand they return to him, they did so.

Because, the Magi believed in the wonder of stars and dreams more than the evil wiles of empire. In a way, they defied gravity~~they defied believing in the expected norms of what a savior should be. When the stars pointed them to a humble, disheveled stable instead of a palace and when their dreams told them to go home another way through uncharted territory and unknown obstacles, they were awestruck and grateful; and trusted.

Me? I probably would have reprogrammed my celestial GPS, and when it continued to point me to Bethlehem, I would have bagged the journey. Because frankly, I need a savior that wins lotteries and can fix anything—like eradicating cancer, saving our earth home, and knocking out bullies forever. That is what I would call gravity-faction.

Isn't that what the world wants? Gravity-faction? Clearly, this is what half our country seeks in presidential elections. We want a fixer, a power to set things straight and right, we want perfection.

Isn't that what we seek when we make New Year's resolutions to be more healthy, more productive, more whatever? But perfection, we learn all too soon, is unattainable.

Margaret Renkl wrote this week about....perfection. She told herself that she would start a new book on NYD, beginning with reflecting on the first bird she saw in the NY. She scribbled a little, but only got as far as a tentative title and then got sidetracked by visitors and family. She wrote, " I will try again tomorrow. There's a great freedom in failing a New Year's resolution on the first day of the year. It's like the family I read

about once, who always took a ball-peen hammer to the bumper of a new car, making one small dent the day they drove it home. They understood that once its perfection was already spoiled, there would be no worrying about when it might get spoiled, or how, or by whom.”

Letting go. Trusting the mystery of stars and dreams. And defying gravity.

Elphaba, in *Wicked*, would not be a part of the Wizard’s plan for unchecked power and domination. Even though the Wizard promised her everything she might want or need—as long as she unlocked the secrets of the Grimmerie for him. It would have been easy for her to do that, considering her gifts of magic.

Elphaba, who was for most of life, an outcast and misunderstood, dreamed that all she needed was the Wizard, who would change her life by fixing her. When her dream turned out to be rooted in deception, she chose otherwise.

She sings,

“Something has changed within me
Something is not the same
I’m through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game
Too late for second-guessing
Too late to go back to sleep
It’s time to trust my instincts, close my eyes and leap
It’s time to try defying gravity
I think I’ll try defying gravity
And you can’t pull me down
And nobody in all of Oz
No wizard that there is or was
Is ever gonna bring me down”

And while Elphaba wanted Glinda to join her, to be in the fight for good together, Glinda chooses not to. So Elphaba flies away on her broom to the west, and we can only hope she finds her people who will defy gravity with her, who will trust in the mystery of stars and dreams and the cosmic skies.

The magi chose to listen to their dreams, and set out on an uncharted path for home after they had discovered the Mystery of the Manger. Satisfied they had met this hidden away Divine, they were changed. Maybe they discovered the Divine within themselves. We don’t know.

The first bird of the year for Margaret Renkl was a pair of cardinals. She writes, “It was a cold morning, and windy, and both birds stayed in the shelter of a dead cedar, very near the windbreak of its trunk. They stayed near each other, too. Cardinals have many symbolic associations, but this morning, as I watched them watching over one another, I

was less interested in symbols than in practicalities. They need one another in this hard, cold, lean time. We will need each other too.”

I often wonder what the point of a savior is. For me, as much as I would like it, I don't think the point is about fixing everything and making everything bright and shiny and better. I think it might be more about pointing us to the holy in one another, and the belovedness that is hidden inside of us, that place that gives us the courage to live in the midst of powers and principalities that seek to dominate and oppress. I think the point of God manifesting Godself in hidden ways like a baby born out of wedlock to a poor and desperate family is to show us how much is possible. I think the point of savior-ifying is more about love and hope and compassion and binding together to defy the weight of evil and selfishness.

Part of the point of Epiphany is to remind us of the gift of mystery, of stars, of dreams, of art and prayer and hope, wherever we are. Today, you are invited to participate in mystery, in sharing communion and in choosing a starword. Star words are a practice connected to the celebration of Epiphany, which has grown over the last decade or so in many churches. You will be able to draw a star out of a basket during communion, and are asked to trust the word you receive as offering guidance for your life in the coming year.

Author Cole Arthur Riley writes:

It can feel foolish to pause to marvel at the stars when the world is burning. Or to find the world beautiful when you've known it betray you.

But wonder is a liberation practice. A reminder that we contain more than tragedy.”

I know. It's mysticalation. It's dreamifying. Following stars and dream. It's defying gravity, but why not? Come, let's us practice our liberationiacs, together. Amen.

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