

Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord

The Rev. Brooks Cato

I have a problem with momentum. Whatever I'm doing, that's where I want to stay. If I'm reading in my comfy chair, the book becomes an anchor holding me there. If I'm in my soft clothes, I definitely don't want to go out. But if I do go out, it's easier to pull a molar than it is to get me out of conversation and home again. In seminary, and for a long time after, I was really good about saying the Daily Office, especially Morning Prayer and Compline. And these days, I've got a streak going on a language learning app that's a source of great pride, again, fueled mostly by momentum. I don't know if everyone's like this, but I suspect momentum's a powerful force in just about all our lives in some way or another. Momentum makes an exercise routine doable (once you get over the momentum of not exercising, that is). Momentum keeps some relationships going longer than they should while holding strong those that ought to last. I'd even say momentum's a part of what keeps prejudices going. It's often easier to just let things keep on keepin' on than trying to change altogether.

And as much as I enjoy the benefits of some of those things keepin' on, I probably like a lot of 'em 'cause they're geared toward people that look like me. Sometimes my momentum doesn't hurt a soul, might even be good for me. But sometimes momentum causes me harm, and sometimes it causes a whole lotta other folks harm, too. It's so easy to let the power of momentum overwhelm the need for change. A few months ago, Ok, several months -- maybe more like a year if I'm honest -- a year ago my heart doctor told me the best way forward was to do some cardio. You know when I started? Day-before-yesterday. I knew I should. I had a professional that's seen pictures of the contents of my heart say I should. My dog looked at me like he couldn't believe I couldn't keep up, and my nephew ran circles around me down in Florida. I knew I should do it. I thought about doing it. I made plans to do it. And I did it...Friday. It's not that I thought not doing my cardio was right, it's that pulling the anchor up to start took so much dang work until one day, for no particular reason I could discern, it happened. Thing is, I could afford to put it off. Momentum slowed me way down, but I got there eventually. And I'm hoping (along with my cardiologist) that I've started momentum in a new direction that'll carry me to a better place. But not all such momentum-breaking can wait.

I read this interview the other day with the creators of my favorite TV show, *Steven Universe*. They talked about how the fantasy genre conveys different meanings to different people. For most, "fantasy" means dragons and wizards and bad English accents. That kind of fantasy lets you the viewer inhabit a world that doesn't really exist, or maybe it does exist kinda parallel to the real world. Most of the time, we consume the characters, the plots, the court intrigue that keeps stuff like that going. And once in a while, when it's really good, we even begin to imagine ourselves in that fantasy world, fighting dragons, rescuing maidens, gossiping behind the king's back. You know the tropes.

But there's another kind of fantasy created by marginalized groups where the fantasy is less about magical kingdoms and more about normalcy. For the former, the fantasy appeals to folks with ordinary lives who want to be extraordinary. For the latter, as the showrunners of *Steven Universe* say, "we as marginalized creators have the opposite problem: the feeling of sticking out, the fear of being exposed, and the basic desire to be safe. The fantasy for me is to feel human ... For a lot of kids ... a fantasy can be as simple as 'I want someone to tell me that it's OK that I exist,' or 'I want to be loved by somebody,' or 'I want to be in a family,' or 'I just want someone to care about me.' That can be a fantasy also."

Among a million other things, today we remember the Baptism of Jesus, a shifting of momentum from the world as it was to an embodied hope of the world as it could be. A fantasy of sorts, maybe, though one grounded solidly in reality. What we long for, the fantasy we uphold, is not escapism; it's goal-setting. The fantasy of the Kingdom of God is achievable. It really is, there's just a ton of momentum pushing against it.

Regardless of political affiliation, if there's one thing we can all agree on, it's that things are broken, especially badly broken right now. Part of the attainable fantasy is that we can repair them. But as we do this work, we have got to repair in such a way that we don't leave anyone out. I'm thinking especially of those for whom normalcy is a fantasy, for whom being pulled over for a simple traffic stop and not having to worry about whether or not you'll survive to reach home is a fantasy, for whom marrying the person they love will never put them in danger is a fantasy, for whom having a father that says, "I love you" is a fantasy, for whom a Rockwellian existence like ours here is a fantasy. And on. And on.

It's as though our whole society needs a good baptism. Repairing and washing off the sins of the past, taking on new promises, living into the dignity of every human being. I wonder if it's possible, even feasible, to erase the need for fantasy. If the world can become the life-giving, soul-feeding fantasy, can you imagine what people could do with that kind of freedom? Can you imagine what God would do with us if we didn't have so much brokenness to fix? It wouldn't put folks like me out of a job. There's still services to lead and people to sit with. There's still neighbors to love and gifts to give. There's even still hurts to heal, but maybe a lot fewer inflicted with malicious intent. It's really not that big of an ask. All we Christians want is for everyone to have what they need. Murphy and Death and Momentum and any number of other invisible forces still stalk around us. We can't stop the world from turning. But we can stop the world from turning disproportionately against certain people.

I know, it all sounds fantastical. There are forces at play much stronger than any one of us alone, and many of those have a vested interest in keeping the momentum going. But we are not any one of us alone. We are the Body of Christ here, a part of the greater Body of Christ in Hamilton, a part of the greater Body of Christ in Central New York, in this country, and unfathomably larger still the world over. I suppose it is fantastical if we let momentum win. But we will not let momentum win. We know we can do it. We know we need to do it. Those who have seen the contents of our hearts beg us to do it. And the time has long since come for us to do it.

It's a simple, two-step process: break the momentum, save the world. That's it. That's all we're talking about here. And we can start it in small ways, showing even the most marginalized that they are loved here, they are wanted here, they are normal here. And as long as that remains a fantasy for anyone, we need a new kind of momentum, a momentum that pushes inequality away, that carries hope into everyone's life, that overwhelms like an avalanche of love and belonging. That's the fantasy we're building here folks. That's the work of the church. And that's the hope of this all-inclusive, fantastical Body of Christ.