

We often imagine Martin Luther, the great protestant reformer, in his most famous moment: charging the powerful church leadership with his ninety-five theses on the doors of Wittenberg – beginning a movement that would change the world. But in darker, quieter, lesser known moments, Luther would spiral into depression and doubt, gripped by an anxiety all too familiar in our modern times. Chart topping Christian artist Lauren Daigle captures the downward spiral like this: “I keep fighting voices in my head that say I’m not enough, every single lie that tells me I will never measure up.” Switch to a different radio station, and pop artist Olivia Rodrigo laments in similarly resonating messages: “I’m so insecure, I think – that I’ll die before I drink...and I don’t stick up for myself. I’m anxious and nothing can help.”

Turn to the beloved Broadway songwriter Lin-Manuel Miranda and the characters in his 2021 film *Encanto* cry out on every track: “Pressure like a grip, grip, grip, and it won’t let go, whoa, pressure like a tick, tick, tick, ‘til it’s ready to blow, whoa: give it to your sister, your sister’s stronger See if she can hang on a little longer who am I if I can’t carry it all? If I falter? Under the surface I hide my nerves and it worsens. I worry something is gonna hurt us.” This quiet anxiety rages within our culture and raged within the famous reformer. And this was his reported reply. In the moments of spiraling darkness, Luther would say to himself: “Be calm, Martin. Thou art baptized.”

Why?

Why would this repeated reminder provide such comfort? “Be calm, Martin, thou art baptized.” Enough to lighten the burden, quiet the voices, clear his vision? “Be calm, Martin, Thou art baptized.” Perhaps – because the world gives us plenty to fear. Not just now, with covid-numbers rising, with the opiate epidemic raging, with injustice and inflation and grief and exhaustion flaring. Not just now, but always. The world gave plenty to fear if you simply listen to the wilderness preacher, John the Baptist.

“Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!” From his mouth, these are not comforting words. John taunts his audience: perhaps they have come to listen because they admire his audacity, his spiritual life, his powerful words – but he tells them: “Someone more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” If you are intimidated

and impressed by me, if you are ready to repent and change your life after you've heard my petty preaching, then get ready to really be blown away! The one to come "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Water is gentle, water is familiar, water is healing, water is woven into your everyday life. What is coming is not water but fire! "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." This powerful person is coming to take only the best and destroy the rest. Repent! Repent or be burned.

That's where the section ends. And fear rings in our ears.

"Then Jesus came."

Who is this Jesus?

We've followed his story in Matthew thus far. We know his coming has been accompanied by dreams and vision, by Kings coming to give and a King coming to kill, by escape and return, by mystery and majesty. But now Jesus is ready to begin his ministry and he comes in complete contrast to what John describes. At the end of John's taunting monologue Matthew writes: "Then Jesus came."

John said he would not be worthy to hold Jesus' sandals: yet Jesus invites him to help him obey God's will and push him beneath the water. To participate in his baptism. John said Jesus would burn us with unquenchable fire, but Jesus humbles himself – and emerges soaking wet. John expected judgment on the people, but the voice from heaven offers affirmation. "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

So who is this Jesus?

Jesus is the one who, though sinless, shows solidarity with sinners, partaking in the sinner's repentance ritual. Jesus is the one who, though he could burn with fire, first chooses to heal with water. And though he has power to amaze, he chooses first to enter into the ordinary. Rachel Held Evans writes: "The Spirit that once hovered over the waters has(s) inhabited them. Now every drop is holy." And Jesus is the one who provides the comfort to quiet every anxiety that lingers, weighing down our days and keeping us up at night. The clouds part, the heavens open, the voice speaks: "This is my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And yes, beloved, that voice is for us also. Because Jesus Christ came to save sinners, invites us to become baptized baptizers, calls us Children of God by naming God as our Heavenly father.

The Apostle Paul writes: “we have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

“Thou art baptized” is comforting to us because every time we recall our baptism we say: “Be calm, oh my soul, you are beloved.”

Every morning when I wake up there is this crusty yellow gunk in my eyes. I need, before anything else, a splash of water on my face to wash it all away. It’s like a daily reminder of my baptism. The gunk can represent this narrative of judgment and scarcity and fear of the future. It makes me see the world in a blur: it’s a place where I cannot move without great care, without worry about war, without scavenging for acceptance, without ruminating over money.

The water washes that gunk away. The water reminds me “thou art baptized.” So see the world with clear vision, with beautiful focus. You are beloved.

And as one who is beloved, accepted and identified as the child of the one good and powerful God, there is nothing to fear. Isaiah writes: “When you walk through the water I’ll be with you, you will never sink beneath the waves; when the fire is burning all around you, you will never be consumed by the flames. Do not be afraid.”

And with this reminder: you belong to God and you are loved by God: there comes an absence of fear and a presence of purpose.

In a different story, Disney’s *The Lion King*, at the beginning of the climax of the film, the heavens open and the derelict runaway prince Simba sees a vision of his murdered father King Mufasa. With a deep resonant voice, with the clouds ever increasing in light and color, this father tells his wide-eyed boy, “You are more than what you have become... You are my son and the one true king. Remember who you are. Remember. Remember. Remember.”

And as the clouds recede and the morning begins, Simba says he knows what he has to do. He returns. He accepts his responsibility. He goes back to face down evil, to uplift his people, to take his place as King.

Knowing who you are means knowing what you have to do. Knowing you are loved means nothing can shake you. So Jesus Christ begins his ministry by being publicly and powerfully reminded of what he already knows. And so, he can go through his temptation in the wilderness, he can go to the edge of the waters and call out for his disciples to follow him, he can go to the multitudes and heal the sick and give sight to the blind, he can teach by word and

deed, he can be rejected, he can suffer and die. Jesus suffered and died that we might live and thrive as adopted children in the family of God. And as members of God's family we are called to do God's work in this blurry eyes world – a world full of people who do not know who they are or that they are loved. A world full of people who listen to this idea of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” and they let interpretations of fear take hold. They let that mean follow Jesus or go to “hell.” When really Jesus is simply saying, follow me in the way of love and we are already in the Kingdom of Heaven that is so near. If you choose the way of judgement and hate, you are in your own personal hell, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and I so want to save you from that now, not just after death, but now. Because you are so so loved. So join me in the Kingdom of Heaven where we show love: we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and come alongside the prisoner. as members of God's family we are called to do God's work in this blurry eyes world – a world full of people who do not know who they are or that they are loved.

It's too big a mission. And it's too easy to forget where we derive the power to accomplish that which we are called to every day.

And so, every day, at every beginning, we – like our brother and savior Jesus Christ – must take the time to remind ourselves and to remind one another. In this season of epiphany we will be traveling through story after story in our scriptures where God revealed Godself, providing, leading, freeing, speaking, shining, illuminating, dazzling. And as we hear their stories I hope it reminds us to share ours. We all need help from one another to wash the gunk from our eyes. God reveals to each of us and we must remind one another: we are children of God: we are beloved. Thanks be to God.