

January 8, 2023
First Sunday after the Epiphany (The Baptism of Our Lord), Year A
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Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

It's toward the end of every year that "of the year" articles start appearing in the media. Some I actually anticipate with eagerness, because they give me useful information—for example, the *New York Times* list of the best books of the year—or they serve as cultural barometers—for example, the Merriam-Webster word of the year.

It was on December 11 *The New York Times* published its annual list of the ten best books of 2022.¹ What most caught my eye this year was the novel *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. That's not because I've read *Demon Copperhead*—I'm still awaiting my ascent to the apex of the lengthy library hold list. Rather, I think it's because my 60-year-old self was happy to see that the 67-year-old Kingsolver still "has it." My love for her writing goes back to shortly after the publication of her first novel, *The Bean Trees*, in 1988. After I became a technical writer, I learned that she was once one, too, and I only loved her more.

It was a couple of weeks earlier, on November 28, that Merriam-Webster announced its 2022 word of the year: *gaslighting*. Merriam-Webster opened its commentary about this by saying:

In this age of misinformation—of "fake news," conspiracy theories, Twitter trolls, and deepfakes—*gaslighting* has emerged as a word for our time.

A driver of disorientation and mistrust, *gaslighting* is "the act or practice of grossly misleading someone especially for one's own advantage." 2022 saw a 1740% increase in lookups for *gaslighting*, with high interest throughout the year.²

It occurs to me that my perusal of these "things of the year" is a sort of ritual, one I use to mark the turning of the year. I think setting a New Year's resolution is another such ritual. Maybe you have your own. I'm not one for resolutions, but I am one for what I'll call reevaluation. I don't actually consciously set out to do that. I just realize one day that that's where I am. You'd think I'd anticipate it, like I anticipate those "of the year" items and lists, but I don't. Suddenly, I just realize that that's where I am.

Planned or unplanned, the turn of the year affects us. I think that's because it's a time of liminality. *Liminality* is an anthropological term that Dictionary.com defines as "a state of transition between one stage and the next, especially between major stages in one's life or during a rite of passage."³ The word comes from the Latin *limen*, which means "threshold," like the threshold of a door.

In the name of productivity, our culture trains us to ignore or dismiss these things. I'm not sure that we should, or even that we really can. We human beings exist in an emotional landscape that is not entirely of our own devising. We course through a wilderness of ever-changing contours. There are decisions along the way, about which path we will take, how we will travel, who will accompany us. Some things we can influence, while others will forever remain beyond our control.

Whether or not we consciously recognize it, these things are working on us, and we on them. On the journey, the turning of the year is a time of assessment and reassessment. We look to the past; we anticipate the future. The turn of the year is perhaps not a major threshold, but it's a threshold nonetheless, whether or not we consciously recognize it. Maybe it's healthy and helpful to at least try to bring our consciousness to it.

The church has its own calendar and its own ways of marking time. Today, for example, is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday we recognize the baptism of Jesus.

It's at his baptism by John that we first meet the adult Jesus. That's true in all four canonical gospels. Each of those gospels begins in its own way, but they all coalesce around the baptism of Jesus. The particulars vary from one to another, but they do agree on this: Jesus' baptism both reveals his divine nature and launches his ministry.

That's why this is such an important story. But I must admit that the timing always feels a little disconcerting. Here we are still doting on a newborn, and suddenly we're faced with a man approaching middle age. I'm never quite ready for it. There's a space, a gap, between the baby and the adult. We don't get any help in moving from one to the other. Every year, I read the gospel for this Sunday in preparation for worship, and every year it feels jarring.

I think, with the two nativity stories we have, we let ourselves focus on the warm and fuzzy parts. Of course, the thing is, though we may focus on the warm and fuzzy parts, in fact both stories are laced through with danger. Matthew's version is especially disturbing. In our retellings, we tend to gloss over that, covering the stench of tension with the perfume of nostalgia. Once the adult Jesus arrives, we are forced to get real.

We might see that gap between the baby Jesus and the adult Jesus is another type of liminality, one that we also occupy. We have all joined Jesus in baptism, though most of us didn't choose that. These days, an awful lot of baptized folks choose not to continue in the faith. There's not the pressure to do so that there used to be. But here we are, both baptized and active followers of Jesus. What mystery lies in the space between those two facts? And how does that keep propelling us forward?

Back to the two things I noticed at my turning-of-the-year: Barbara Kingsolver and *gaslighting*. Both are now part my annual reevaluation this year, which seems to be in full swing. The word *gaslighting* has me thinking about just how much cultural gaslighting has gone on, and how many marginalized populations are now refusing to accept it. More personally, Barbara Kingsolver has me thinking that I'm not too old to contribute positively to this rapidly changing world. I guess both those things give me hope for 2023 and beyond.

And so it is that looking back is also helpful in looking forward. If you need some help with that, here's one idea. If you have experience in graphic design, or even simply of specifying a color for a design purpose, you know the word *Pantone*. As described on the Pantone website, "Pantone provides a universal language of color that enables color-critical decisions through every stage of the workflow for brands and manufacturers."⁴ In other words, a pantone Pantone color is the exact same around the world, no matter who the manufacturer of the product is. Supposedly there are now over 5000 specified Pantone colors, each with a name and number.

Near the end of every year, Pantone names a color of the year for the *following* year. Around December 1, Pantone announced that the Pantone Color of the Year for 2023 is a new color called Viva Magenta. The announcement said this:

Pantone's Color of the Year, Viva Magenta 18-1750, vibrates with vim and vigor. It is a shade rooted in nature descending from the red family and expressive of a new signal of strength. Viva Magenta is brave and fearless, and a pulsating color whose exuberance promotes a joyous and optimistic celebration, writing a new narrative.

This year's Color of the Year is powerful and empowering. It is a new animated red that revels in pure joy, encouraging experimentation and self-expression without restraint, an electrifying, and a boundaryless shade that is manifesting as a stand-out statement. PANTONE 18-1750 Viva Magenta welcomes anyone and everyone with the same verve for life and rebellious spirit. It is a color that is audacious, full of with and inclusive of all.⁵

Okay, that's a bit overblown for describing a color. But I like the idea that it might describe us. So maybe it's food for thought. I like the idea of a Viva Magenta year, for myself, for our church, and for our expanding layers of community. Maybe simply identifying something like that is helpful in rejiggering person's mindset.

In one of the podcasts I listen to, the hosts did an exercise for the turn of the year. They were clear they weren't making resolutions. Instead, what they did was this: they identified one old way of thinking that they will try to let go of, and one new way of thinking that they will try to adopt. This person who doesn't actually like resolutions thought that sounded pretty good.

Maybe it's fitting that the turn from the baby to the adult Jesus coincides with the turn of the calendar year. Like the new year, presents us with the threshold of a fresh start. In a few minutes we're going to renew the promises of our baptismal covenant. Yes, we only get baptized once. But maybe, every year at this time, we have a sort of rebaptism with Jesus. This gives us the space to look again at what Jesus is about and what that means to us. In such a time of pondering, maybe the baptismal covenant is a good addition to the mix.

For all of us, may 2023 in fact turn out to be a glorious, Viva Magenta, new year.

Notes

¹ "The 10 Best Books of 2022," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2022, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/29/books/best-books-2022.html> (accessed January 8, 2023).

² "Word of the Year 2022," Merriam-Webster, November 28, 2022, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year#:~:text=Word%20of%20the%20Year%202022%20%7C%20Gaslighting%20%7C%20Merriam%2DWebster> (accessed January 8, 2023).

³ "liminality," Dictionary.com, available at <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/liminality> (accessed January 8, 2023).

⁴ "About Pantone," Pantone, available at <https://www.pantone.com/about-pantone> (accessed January 8, 2023).

⁵ "What is Viva Magenta," on the "Welcome to the Magentaverse" page of the Pantone website, available at <https://www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year/2023> (accessed January 8, 2023).