

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Christmas 2 (A) ~ 4 January 2026  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Jeremiah 31:7-14  
Psalm 84:1-8  
Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

*Let us pray:*

Blessed are you who don't have  
all the right answers.  
You who realize that "I don't know"  
is the best response and posture for now.  
You who lean in, unafraid to learn  
and change and be wrong along the way.

Blessed are you,  
stretched and pressed and pulled  
by the uncertainty,  
deciding to not stay the same  
because we are not who we were.

We have been pulled into the unknown  
without our permission.  
But the challenge is the same:  
reveal truth in love in the midst of seeming chaos. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

Good morning, beloveds. As we bravely face this new year together, I thought that these words from Kate Bowler might set a helpful tone. If you don't know her work, let me take a second to commend it to you. Kate Bowler is a writer, podcaster, TED Talk presenter, and professor of American religious history at — you guessed it — Duke Divinity School. I haven't had a class with her yet, but I am

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days* (New York: Convergent Books, 2023), 94.

determined not to leave my program without sitting at her feet for a semester. She is brilliant, wise, funny, and *honest* at a time when truth seems an ever-more-precious commodity.

You may be familiar with some of Kate's book titles, such as

*Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day!*  
*The Lives We Actually Have*

And my personal favorite,

*Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved.*

This gives you a sense of Kate Bowler's fierce, no-holds-barred, straightforward point of view. She doesn't waste time on empty, pie-in-the-sky platitudes. When she was 35, Kate was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer – which, of course, changed everything. Now, 10 years later, she is healthy and in remission and back in the classroom, but she is clear that she cannot return to life before the diagnosis.

In an NPR interview with Terry Gross a few years back, Kate said this:

*I think I don't have the luxury of being too sophisticated anymore. I mean, you just get infected with this urgency that comes with facing your death. And so I pray for very basic things. Please, God, make me kind and open to the pain of the world. Please, God, heal me...help me be a good mom and a wife. I mean, just really basic stuff...*

I know that many of you – many of us – have experienced such everything has changed, nothing is the same moments in our own lives.

Kate went on to say that, among the “deepest, hardest, truest things” she learned from her journey with illness was

*those lies that I had perpetuated all along, that I needed to be shiny to be worthy of God's love and the attention of others and that I needed to achieve and be master and commander of my, you know, everything.*<sup>2</sup>

Wow. That's it, in a nutshell, isn't it? When the reality of life fails to match our hopes, our dreams, our aspirations, and the *image* we want desperately to project to the world, we are forced to re-calibrate.

To focus on the “really basic stuff.”

To recognize just how fragile and vulnerable and beautiful and beloved we are...and to celebrate it.

One of the unparalleled privileges of parish ministry – especially in a smaller congregation like St. Dunstan's – is that I get to hear your stories. I am invited into those unvarnished, façade-dismantling moments of your lives when it seems as though all your plans have just gone off the rails and the future is now uncertain. Words cannot adequately express the feeling of looking into your eyes at Communion, touching your hand with mine and sharing “The Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.”

The *broken* Body of Jesus, mind you.

Those moments are real.

They are intimate.

And those moments are why we are here – not just in Church on this Sunday morning, but as humans wandering through this world together. We are here to “reveal truth in love in the midst of seeming chaos,” to borrow language from Kate Bowler.

That is all that actually matters.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/12/585066841/a-stage-4-cancer-patient-shares-the-pain-and-clarity-of-living-scan-to-scan>

And so, as you and I stand on the threshold of a new year, as we look toward 2026 with no small degree of anxiety and “fear and trembling,” I wonder if this isn’t the perfect opportunity to acknowledge our fragility and vulnerability and rejoice that we get to be fragile and vulnerable and beautiful and beloved...together.

What a gift that is; we must not take it for granted.

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus is particularly fragile and vulnerable. The story of Mary and Joseph escaping to Egypt out of fear for the life of their tiny, infant son is chilling. It’s not a passage that we hear very often in Church: In fact, I realized this week that, in 25 years of ordained ministry, I don’t think that I have ever preached on it. And it’s little wonder. The lectionary gives us three choices for the Gospel on the Second Sunday after Christmas, which is unusual. Typically there is just one option. We are permitted to read the story of the Epiphany, of the three “wise men” visiting the Holy Family in Bethlehem, which is celebrated on January 6...or the account of Jesus in the Temple as a twelve-year-old...or the Gospel we just heard.

I selected this one, after a lot of prayer and reflection, because I think it has much to say to us at the present time.

Because the story of the Flight into Egypt is a powerful reminder of the whole point of the Incarnation, of God becoming human, in the first place. If we focus only on the tranquility of the babe in the manger, or even on the wise men bearing their gifts for the newborn King, we miss the precariousness of the Divine in the world.

We miss the danger.

We miss the seeming chaos.

And it’s easy to think that Jesus’ birth is nothing more than a static tableau, the stuff of crèche scenes and Christmas Pageants.

Please don't get me wrong: I love the crèche and the Pageant. It's just that there is so much more nuance to the story than the "happily-ever-after" moment they depict.

Matthew tells us that, no sooner have the wise men departed from Bethlehem to "go home by another way" than Immanuel, God-with-us, is threatened. Herod, and the empire he represents, cannot tolerate the competition of God at work in the world.

The king, too, is threatened.

And we know what we humans tend to do in the face of change, when the *status quo* is disrupted. We dig in our heels. We grasp at what is slipping away.

Sometimes we lie and cheat and bully and rage so as not to risk losing our hold on life as we know it.

That's certainly what Herod does here.

So God must go on the lamb. Jesus and His parents are in exile. They become refugees.

And although the older Jesus may not remember this precarious time in His young life – hopefully He won't, given how traumatic it is – no doubt it has a lasting impact on Him. I imagine that it is part of His origin story, woven into the family narrative Joseph and Mary share with Him as He grows. This early event **must** be formative for Jesus, helping to mold Who He becomes.

Think about those primal moments in your own story that continue to influence you now. So many of us carry proverbial "baggage" from childhood – unhealed wounds and persistent pain that we struggle to shake. Why should Jesus be any different?

If we believe what we say, that Jesus is, in fact, fully human and fully divine, then Jesus *must* be shaped by this experience of fear and uncertainty and very real and present danger.

And what does that suggest?

To my mind, it suggests that Jesus knows, in the marrow of His own human bones, what it means to be fragile and vulnerable. He understands our story – because He has lived it.

The details of our individual experience may vary, but the basic narrative is the same:

The world can be a threatening and dangerous place.

There are Herods out there who would seek to destroy, or at least thwart, the presence of God.

Jesus gets it in a way no one else possible can.

We can trust that. We can trust Him.

And our challenge, should we choose to accept it, is to continue to reveal truth in love in the midst of seeming chaos.

What might this look like?

And how might we do that this year...together?

I ask these things in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
*Amen.*