

I. Epiphany is invitation to seek ecstatic joy as antidote to fear

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

This is the line that has stuck in my head from these texts. Overwhelmed with joy. The Isaiah text has this line: **Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.** Our offertory anthem says this discovery is finding true love and it will make us need to dance. I take all of this to suggest that the heart of this Epiphany story and this Epiphany season is about discovering a joy that will thrill us, make our hearts sing and make us dance!

Overwhelmed with joy. That's the part- overwhelmed. Overwhelmed suggests encountering something you can't handle fully, something that washes over you, something that you drown in, something that takes over you.

It's like what the angel Gabriel says of how Mary will conceive Jesus- she will be overwhelmed, overshadowed, swept up with the power of the electrical current that is the Spirit and this intense ecstasy will open the door for God to come into the world in human form. For today's story is still as much about Mary as it is about the baby Jesus. In this teenage girl's passion, her vision, her poetry come-to-life, her willingness to give her life to the overwhelming

tumult that is God, her soul magnifies that God and becomes the bridge for heaven to come to earth.

Overwhelmed, heart will be thrilled- this is not the language of well-mannered church piety. This is language of ecstasy. This is the language of falling in love.¹ Overwhelmed will veer into overwrought. The intensity of seeing will make us radiant, and will exhaust us and seem like too much. Many of us say no to such dramatic feeling. Again, it's part of what makes Mary so brave.

And if we want to discover where and how God has come to us, this ecstasy is one of our guides. The feeling of finding God, present, shining in what seemed irredeemably dark, is a feeling that will crash over us like waves in the sea, like wind across the desert, like stars come down to us, will threaten to overwhelm us.

It is my deep conviction that where you find that ecstasy, there you have found this One. Where are you radiant, where does your heart race and thrill, where do you feel dizzy? Pay attention to those things! Risk being

¹ [If you ask me about that moment/ Bright sunshine was falling down/ If you ask me about that feeling...Hey, dance with me dance with me] -J Hope

overwhelmed! Seek and pursue that feeling with tenacity and commitment!
And not just for your own sake, but for the sake of the world! This feeling, this electrical current, is the power that can right the world.

For, the wise men cross paths with Herod. Herod was very afraid, and all Jerusalem with him. This struck me very strongly this year. How the fear of an official leader can poison a whole people. How we as a people can be held captive to the fear of those in power. The people walk in darkness. And what does God say to this? How does God triumph over this power of fear? God appears, God is revealed to be an alternative. The ones who can become overwhelmed with joy will not be owned by the fear of Herod. Simple as that.

You who can let your heart be thrilled, who can see God in the world, you will be radiant. The light of this joy is available to all- can be seen by all the peoples, reaches all the nations, and yet is also invisible if we follow the fear of Herod. So part of the invitation of Epiphany is to seek ecstasy with some urgency- this ecstasy is our armor of light.

II. Pattern of joy visible in the world now: BTS example

Lately, I've been obsessed with a K Pop band called BTS. You may have heard of them- they're a global sensation, topping billboard charts, breaking all kinds of social media records, selling out shows all over the world, appearing on Ellen Degeneres and Jimmy Fallon, winning Artist of the Year at the Asian Music Awards. Readers voted them #1 for Time magazine's 'Person of the Year,' they spoke to the United Nations as part of leading a Unicef campaign to end youth violence. I have been captivated by their dazzling music videos. They are seven members who rap, sing, dance, write, perform. Their style is exuberant and joyous.

The very first thing I saw was a dance practice to a pop and rap song where they were costumed as snow white and six dwarves. The juxtaposition of rap and hip hop dance choreo with these silly outfits, just for a Halloween practice session, was so silly and endearing and unexpected that I got curious. I watched the IDOL music video and was blown away by the sheer volume of imagery and style and references being invoked, (there are white tigers and rabbits in the moon and 50 different outfits) all to the catchiest of tunes in effortless bilingual lyrics. Then I saw Spring Day and I was hooked. Spring Day uses the Ursula LeGuin short story 'Walking Away from Omelas,' as a

lens to explore the meaning of loss and belonging. These people have some range!

To follow these stars soon reveals a whole world they are creating with their millions of fans around the world. [the peoples of the earth- the nations shall come to you.] Using the same social media methods that are used to stress us out and immobilize us with fear, these seven with their army of love are offering an antidote. Without avoiding the difficulties of this life, or this moment, their relentless message of love and forgiveness and healing through music and dance is infectious.

Jewish political reporter focusing on violence and oppression David Perry wrote an article this week about the BTS fan world.² “On my internet, neo-nazis threaten my life, left-wingers call me a neoliberal shill, and everyone complains that I watch the wrong TV shows. [but] I did find out what it would be like if the internet was the nicest place on earth, if Twitter was a platform in which people flooded each other with love, encouraged each of us to feel accepted and to accept ourselves.” This was his experience as he learned about the band’s commitment to helping people through and with mental health challenges like depression and addiction, their commitment to

² <https://www.thecurrent.org/feature/2019/01/04/what-happens-when-the-bts-army-adopts-you>

global positivity for young people, their co-creation with their fans. BTS is a thrilling phenomenon!

Funny though, people can be inclined to dismiss what this group is doing because they have vaulted into stardom through the positive obsession³ of their fans, many of whom are teenage girls. How silly and how foolish to dismiss the vision and passion of teenage girls. As we've already observed, our entire salvation narrative hinges on a teenage girl. Perhaps we should exactly be paying attention to where teenage girls lead.

This group of dancers and musicians has made me need to dance. They have made me remember the exuberant force of overwhelming joy. They have thrilled my heart to see that the pattern of God has not finished incarnating, but is alive and with us still. You may not all go fall in love with BTS –although some of you might want to- but I exhort you to find this pattern somehow, somewhere.

The invitation of Epiphany is to seek ecstasy with some urgency- this ecstasy is our armor of light, our answer to the power of fear, our true love and our hope.

³ “Without positive obsession, there is nothing.” Octavia Butler