

Old Stories Made New
Sermon by Lori Erickson
New Song Episcopal Church
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In the fall of 2019, a man named Martin Shaw began a 101-day retreat in a forest in Devon, England. He wasn't a stranger to these woods—indeed, throughout his entire life he'd sought solace and inspiration in nature. But well into middle age, he felt alienated, discouraged, and in need of something more. And so he took to the woods.

Martin didn't **live** in the woods for the entire 101 days, but each day he retreated there for at least part of each day. He spent a lot of time listening—to the birds, to the trees, and to the inner murmurs of his heart.

On the 101st day, his last one in the woods, he decided to stay all night as a way of ending his forest retreat. And sometime in the middle of the night, he had a vision that wasn't, he said, due to being high or drunk or dreaming. He saw a great light come down from the sky, almost like a painted arrow shooting straight out of the heavens. He stood transfixed as the shaft of light fell onto the ground about ten feet away from him and was overwhelmed by feelings of intense joy.

This epiphany began Martin's conversion to Christianity, which was both unexpected and not entirely welcome. That's because Martin Shaw is one of the foremost scholars of mythology in the world. Though he'd been raised in a Christian home, he'd long ago left the religion of his childhood. He wrote books, taught classes, and enthralled audiences around the world with his storytelling. He was especially well-known in pagan circles. And then the unexpected happened. He became, of all things, a Christian.

Martin's conversion turned his life upside down. He lost friends. Many of his colleagues disapproved. And he struggled to reconcile his blossoming Christian faith with his professional vocation. Some of these issues are still being worked out. But something changed in Martin Shaw's heart on a dark night in the Devon woods, something that seems to have the hand of God about it.

I thought about the story of Martin Shaw when I read the lectionary passages for this morning. Both the reading from Isaiah and the reading from Matthew contain these beautiful lines:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--
on them light has shined.

We don't expect dramatic enactments of this passage—but maybe we should. And that's why I think the story of Martin Shaw's conversion is worth thinking about, especially during this season of Epiphany which is luminous with light of many kinds.

Bob and I listened to hours of Martin Shaw's stories on a recent long drive to Florida. Part of what makes Martin so appealing is that he has the air of an old wizard about him—he's a Gandalf-like figure, with shaggy hair, a salt-and-pepper beard, and a deep and resonant voice. It was fascinating to hear this skilled storyteller, so steeped in world mythologies, applying his craft to his new-found faith. For example, we listened enthralled as he told the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, showing us the Christian underpinnings of the legend. We heard with fresh ears the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel and of John of Patmos writing the

book of Revelation. What Martin Shaw is doing is similar to what Jesus was doing as he walked the hills of Galilee long ago: he is taking the old stories and giving them new life.

I'm a writer, so I guess I have a natural bias towards stories. But it's always struck me that people are more convinced by stories than by theology. A good story—one that has meat on its bones—is one that can be endlessly told and retold and mined for meaning. The gospels are full of stories like that, including the one we heard this morning. The people who followed Jesus were steeped in the stories of the Hebrew scriptures. They responded in part to what Jesus was doing because his actions resonated so deeply with stories they'd heard over and over. That's why those fishermen dropped their nets to follow him. Jesus was bringing the old stories to life in front of them.

Which brings us back to Martin Shaw, who believes that part of his calling is to bring the old Christian stories to life again—not just in the Bible, but the stories of the saints as well. As a native of the British Isles he's especially interested in the stories of the early Celtic saints. Let me give you a sample. Here's Martin talking about St. Kevin of Glendalough in Ireland. As you listen, I invite you to imagine we're seated next to a crackling fire in a cozy pub on the moors, with a cold rain falling outside and a stiff wind making the windows rattle.

The story goes that it was Lent. Kevin was keeping away from people and filling himself deep and sweet with contemplation, the breath of prayer. He allowed his small circled world to expand out a little into the nearby waters, forest and grasses. He kept getting bigger, truer, wilder. He stretched his arms out of his cell window in the praise shape that Christians use and settled into his devotions. When you enter that consciousness, animals start to trust you. You have a little of the scent of your creator. Somewhere in the bliss of it a blackbird landed on

Kevin's outstretched hand. So content it was, it constructed a nest there and then to keep its eggs.

There's now an issue for Kevin, as you have no doubt detected.

The world's pragmatism says, Shrug the bird off, the earth's mysticism says, Excellent! Don't let a chance like this go by!

In the man, two consciousnesses have at each other. Battling. As they do in all of us. Kevin took on the huge commitment that a religious life offers. Something Other was nesting, getting born, something that was going to require both discomfort and patience.

He not once snapped his hand shut, cursed the bird or otherwise complained. Till the bird's chicks were hatched and ready to leave, Kevin kept his hand outstretched.

And then Martin concludes with this passage:

What have I kept my hand outstretched for? How many times have I snapped it shut? Withdrawn? ... You can draw this story with only a few words, but the depth and endurance of it keeps unfolding. Let's hold the story in our palm like Kevin holds the blackbird, the simplicity and challenge of it.ⁱ

Bob and I listened to Martin Shaw spin stories like this for hours on our recent trip. Something about **hearing** them, rather than reading them, seemed to help them settle deep into our hearts. There's so much that's wrong with the world these days, so much to be worried about, but hearing those old stories was deeply comforting. (And if you want to hear him yourself you can subscribe to his [Substack](#), where he has a series of stories that he calls "Liturgy of the Wild," which describe his thoughts about Christianity and what he calls its "wild heart.")

There's another old story coming up this week that relates to this theme. Wednesday is the Feast Day of the Conversion of St. Paul, which is another story of light coming out of nowhere. A man named Saul is on the road to Damascus. He's been a zealous persecutor of the new group who follow the resurrected Jesus, delighting in harassing and punishing them. Then, out of nowhere, as he's traveling, a light appears to him. It is Jesus, and from that point on his life is transformed.

It's scary, isn't it, to think of such a thing happening? But Jesus, and the earlier prophets of Israel, promise that it does.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--
on them light has shined.

It happened to Saul on the road to Damascus, and to Martin Shaw in a forest in Devon, and maybe it can happen to us too.

But here's one final piece of good news: I don't think it always has to be so dramatic. Instead of a great shaft of light, sometimes the Holy Spirit comes to us like the bird came to St. Kevin. That bird can signify many things. I invite you to go ahead and choose your own metaphor for what this might mean in your own life. The important thing is that when that divine bird comes, we need to hold out our hand, be patient, and endure the discomfort of waiting. Something is being born, something important, and we have a role to play in it.

So let the old stories live in you, because when they do, you may be amazed at what can happen.

ⁱ <https://martinshaw.substack.com/p/bells-and-birds>