

“Something Wicked This Way Comes” - What Harry Potter and ISIS Teach Us about (Evil) Confirmation – *By the Rev. Dr. Patricia Lyons, priest at the Church of the Epiphany in the Diocese of Washington, DC – Originally posted on Facebook, December 20, 2016*

I awoke this morning to the horrific news that the Russian Ambassador to Turkey was assassinated yesterday (Monday, Dec. 19th). The premeditated murder was caught on video by a camera only five feet from the Ambassador, so the world is now watching the horror up close, again and again and again. I am haunted by the fact that the gunman was only 22 years old; a well-educated, well-dressed and multi-lingual police officer. In his tie and shined shoes, he looked like a high school debater or homecoming date.

The assassin in Turkey shot the ambassador dead and then proceeded to pace around the bleeding body, making declarations in Arabic and Turkish. He stated his belief in the one God, he stated his membership in ISIS, he renounced the pillage of Assad in Syria, allied himself with the oppressed of Syria and then waited to be killed by police. Minutes after his first shots left the man bleeding to death on the floor, the assassin circled back and shot the ambassador again in the head, as his dramatic coup de gras before the Turkish police, for whom he was waiting, arrived and sealed his suicide mission. The whole horrific scene struck me as the darkest and sickest form of religious Confirmation I have ever seen. His speech while wielding a loaded gun (the powerful wand of our current age) echoed the rubric of the Confirmation Rite. He renounced, he professed, and he committed his life. I have watched some of the ‘suicide videos’ of terrorists that get released after their deaths and acts of terror. I have been struck how formulaic the scripts are for each of the young adults dressed in black, standing or sitting in front of flags of hate and weapons of war. In each video, as from the mouth of the assassin in Turkey, one hears the echo of vows.

If you are a Harry Potter reader, you remember when Draco received in the sixth book his first order to kill Dumbledore, his beloved Headmaster and the greatest living wizard. To that point in his life, he was known as a boy who had everything. Only adulthood held out the promise of personal agency. In his murderous mission, Draco saw a chance at adulthood: a chance to show the world that he was not only a man, but he was his own man. After several misguided attempts, Draco is an emotionally unstable wreck. He, more than anyone, recognizes the Headmaster’s innocence, his love for him and for life. And yet, Draco reaches for adulthood by pointing his murderous wand at the only adult who has ever shown him unconditional love.

This moment of murder illustrated that Draco’s baptism into an atmosphere of bigotry was now ready to be confirmed with his own will, his own words and his own actions. Dumbledore, unarmed but at peace, reached out to Draco with a message about the unchangeable dignity and beauty of Draco’s soul, despite any actions done or left undone. In the end, Draco’s heart had already healed enough with Dumbledore’s anointing that he lowered his wand, only to watch another kill Dumbledore right in front of him.

Confirmation in the Episcopal Church is at a crossroad. Some have given up on the sacramental rite. Some are skeptical but dutiful in offering it every year. Some are cynical, while others just want Confirmation demoted to an optional pastoral office. There are islands of excellence in Confirmation spread across the national church, but not a clear understanding about what is working, where it is working, and why.

All denominations of Christianity have a formal or informal theological anthropology, ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and view of scripture. What makes us all different is the order in which we observe these pillars. Why I became an Episcopalian is that I found in the Anglican tradition a confidence in human nature as one of the guides to truth. The theological anthropology of Anglicanism takes the sinfulness of humanity seriously but takes no less seriously the identity of human beings as bearers of the Imago Dei. Unlike our siblings in more Reformed traditions who form their theological anthropology from their view of scripture, we are more bullish on humanity and start with the person to see what revelation we receive from rational reflection on human nature and experience. We allow these reflections to form or correct our sacramental, ecclesiological and biblical understanding of truth. Episcopalians see that both human being and Holy Bible are sacred. The flesh and the word are in dialogue in this tradition, informing and maturing the other's truth.

We are wired for Confirmation. I know this from human experience and from the assassination in Turkey. As a Church, we either speak to and make our innate longing sacred or someone else will. To avoid, sideline, or cease Confirmation is not only unwise, it is un-Anglican. If there is an observable universal yearning in the human person to confirm their beliefs at threshold moments in human development – publicly, ritually, and personally – then it is Anglican that we name, claim, and form that longing.

We will either train young people to be heroes like Harry Potter or we will, through mediocrity or failure with Confirmation, leave souls open to follow the path of Draco Malfoy. Being trusted with a mission offered more vitality than life as a free person without a given mission to confirm. It is immoral and unnecessary to leave souls thirsty for confirmation in empty wells of evil that will anoint them if we do not. The Harry Potter narrative paints the choice as clear and arresting: will our religions confirm heroes or create assassins?