

A Sermon by James Shire, M.Div., Seminarian from St. Christopher's Church, Kailua, HI 96723  
On the observance of the Feast of St. Christopher, July 23, 2017

2 Esdras 2:42-48; Psalm 121; 1 Peter 3:14-18,22; Matthew 10:16-22  
(The Common of Martyr Saints I, BCP 925)

+In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore,” muttered Dorothy Gale as she walked out of her black and white Kansas farm home into the bright, colourful, and wholly different wonderful world of Oz. Dorothy left behind a world of the same, the predictable, and the familiar to enter into a world of magic, wonder, and fantasy. And yet, she spends her entire time in Oz trying to find a way back home to the familiar, the predictable, and the same flat black and white Kansas. In the end, she awakens back in Kansas from a dream, and declares, “if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own back yard.” And that's it, that's the end.

Or so it would seem, if you only watched the 1939 MGM film. I grew up reading a number of the Oz books by L. Frank Baum, and there, the story does not end. Oz is not some dreamy, faraway place in Dorothy's imagination, but an actual, real place. Oz is eventually ruled by the faerie queen Ozma, tormented by the peculiar rock-like creature called the Nome King, Dorothy, Auntie Em, and Uncle Henry eventually move permanently to Oz, and even the charlatan Wizard of Oz is even welcomed back into Oz and taught real magick from Glinda the Good Witch. Yet, even though Dorothy and the Land of Oz can continue to exist, I have to close the book eventually, turn off the movie, and return to the real world. We may live in a world of colour, and yet, unless we actively seek the fantasy in book, film, television, or video games, we live in a world governed by reason and everyday can become the same, the predictable, and the familiar. We are told to abandon dreams and fantasies as being childish so that we can focus on what we call the “real world.”

In celebrating the Feast of S. Christopher, we encounter that paradox and tension between reality and fantasy, between Kansas and Oz. In looking into the readings for this Feast, I looked within various sources, as the Episcopal Church doesn't even have explicit readings for the day. The readings that were chosen for today are general readings for a martyr which are found in the back of the BCP. In the lectionaries and missals of the Roman Catholic Church and the pre-reformation Church of England have prayers that focus on the martyrdom of S. Christopher, but give few details into the story of how he was beheaded by the King of Lycia after the king attempted to persuade him to renounce Christianity. The Feast of S. James the Apostle, which shares the same day, actually overshadows him in nearly every missal, and the readings for the day are listed for him, not Christopher. Any reference to him in England was erased more or less in the Church of England after the English reformation, and Christopher along with a number of saints from the ancient and medieval period were removed from the Festal Calendar because their historicity could not be clearly proven. And this is why some call S. Christopher “Mr. Christopher”.

And yet, what has drawn people to celebrate S. Christopher in the past and even to this day, what he is depicted doing in art and iconography? It is the legend of him carrying the Christ-child across a raging river. For those that don't know the legend: there once was a man, considered by some to be a giant as he was seven feet tall, who searched to serve the strongest

king. He eventually learns of Jesus, and seeks to find him in order to serve him. A hermit informs him that he may be able to find and serve Jesus by carrying people across a dangerous river. So he carried travelers on his back, and delivered them safely from one end of the river to the other. One day, a child came to cross the river, and as Christopher was carrying him, he began to sink into the river, discovering that the child was heavier than the heaviest lead. When he finally reached the other side, he said to the child, "You have put me in the greatest danger. I do not think the whole world could have been as heavy on my shoulders as you were." The child replied, "You had on your shoulders not only the whole world but Him who made it. I am Christ your king, whom you are serving by this work." The child then vanished.

The legend of S. Christopher is one of many fantastic stories, and his story exist alongside many fantastic stories of other saints that are famous, but whose celebration is limited: S. Denis, who after being beheaded in Paris, picked up his head and began to preach on the Trinity; S. Juliana, who was put into a tub of molten lead to punish her for her conversion to Christianity, and found it to be a cool bath; and S. Theodora, a woman who disguised herself as a monk and could drive away the Devil with nothing but the sign of the cross. These legends, and many others, became very popular in the antique and medieval period. Though the readings and prayers focused on what little history there could be, or the ideals of ideas of martyrdom or asceticism, people were drawn to the magic, wonder, and fantasy of saints like Christopher, and they point to a God capable of making the impossible possible. And they give the world colour in a time and place where me might not want to live.

In all of our advancement in technology, philosophy, and theology, through the Reformation, the enlightenment, and modernity, seemingly as we have progressed so much, we have also stripped away the colour in our world and in our church into a flat, black and white space where miracles and wonder are on the backburner. We can look out to the farthest stars, and look into the infinite space between electrons and protons, but what we find is the void. We yearn for meaning, but the void answer with only silence.

This is not to embrace an anti-science world. Evolution is real, the earth is round and orbits the sun, vaccines are good, and GMOs are safe. Nor am I suggesting an end to a separation of church and state. The developments of technology, philosophy, and theology are good, but we need the story of Christopher, as fantastic and bizarre as it is, to remind us that there is more to this reality than what science, technology, mathematics, and engineering can teach us. We need the fantasy, we need the dreams, and we need the colour to teach us of what the world can be. We need to look beyond the void, and there we find God, and that is where the emptiness of existence ends, and where true existence begins. And this existence, this faith, can help us to have the courage to face the dangers and evil of this world.

Over the rainbow and beyond the sky we can find Heaven and the Throne of God; deep within us we find the light and life that God has given to us; and through the stories passed on from generation to generation we can find what the world is and what it could be: stories to comfort us, stories to guide and teach us, and stories to give us courage in the face of a world that tells us to abandon our hope, give into the grey despair of a bleak reality that we cannot change, and forget about our call to love our God and love our neighbours. By embracing the colour, the dreams, and the fantasies, we become like Christopher, we become Christ-bearers, carrying Christ within us, around us, and into the world.

So, even if the story of Christopher isn't factual, we must believe that it is still true  
Amen.