

The Church of the Good Shepherd

Lexington, Kentucky

Sermon for January 8, 2011 – Baptism of the Lord

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It may come as a surprise to you that today is the first of several Sundays after the Epiphany, yet in many Episcopal churches the feast of the Epiphany itself is hardly celebrated at all. In fact, Epiphany is perhaps the only great festival day of the Church year that is observed more in neglect than celebration. Although an important holiday in many countries, Epiphany has simply never caught on in mainstream American culture, having been eclipsed by Christmas itself.

Epiphany is traditionally the feast of the “Three Wise Men” from the East, called Magi in Scripture, meaning magicians or astrologers. This unlikely trio comes seemingly out of nowhere, looking for the one who is born King of the Jews. Appearing only once, in the near mythic story of Jesus’ birth recorded in the *Gospel of Matthew*, they then disappear from Scripture as suddenly as they first appeared. But the point of their journey remains forever important. They are the first to understand what others could not see: that Jesus “has been born king of the Jews.” For the ancient Church, this “epiphany” or manifestation of the Messiah was worth celebrating. And it still is.

The Gospels are full of moments of epiphany in which the divine becomes manifest in our midst, and we will read of them throughout the coming Epiphany season. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus arrives at the Jordan requesting baptism from a reluctant John. Coming up out of the waters, “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mk.1:11). Heaven and earth are brought together in this sacramental instant, and God’s Messiah is revealed before our very eyes. His mission and ministry become crystal clear.

“You are my Son, the beloved.” These words, or ones very much like them, are proclaimed more than once throughout the Gospels almost as exclamation marks emphasizing the role and reality of Christ. We find them repeated at the Transfiguration midway through our Lord’s public ministry. And, the centurion at the cross comes to the same epiphany. He exclaims that Jesus was indeed “the Son of God.”

What are we to make of these epiphanies for ourselves today? For one thing, they are sobering reminders that the Lord is more than just our sibling, more than simply a friend we can turn to when we need a listening ear, more even than a prophet. Christ is God made present in our day and age. His divinity spills over into our poor earthly realm. As we read of Jesus’ journeys throughout Galilee and beyond, as we listen attentively to his stories and parables, we are from time to time reminded emphatically of where all this is coming from and where it leads.

If the Father can be well pleased with Christ, his Son, he can be well pleased with us too, his children by adoption and grace. That is the meaning of the Gospel and the promise made to us in our own baptism.

If Epiphany is the sometimes forgotten feast, perhaps it is in part because an epiphany can sometimes seem an ephemeral reality. Christ abides with us, yet his presence in our lives can seem at the same time all too fleeting as we go about our routines of family and work. Even as Jesus’ own baptism passes, the heavens close and the dove is gone, leaving Jesus to his earthly mission. There is work to be done. There is a Gospel to be proclaimed. Epiphany experienced becomes Gospel lived.

Our own Baptismal Covenant reminds us that we are called to “seek and serve Christ in all persons,” loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. Whenever it was that we “came up from the water” of our own baptism, whether recently or decades ago, we came up from those waters a new person in Christ, a child of God called to make the

Lord manifest and known in our world today. Our baptism unites who we are today with the power of the Christ, the “Beloved” of the Father, baptized at the Jordan centuries ago.

Christ dwells with us today and is still there to be discovered by those who, like the Magi, are willing to journey far from the commonplace in their quest. Like the Wise Ones from the East, we must be willing to leave the comfort of our preconceptions and prejudices. We must be willing to look for the Christ in places others refuse to enter, whether it be a homeless shelter, a soup kitchen, or a stable. The Magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We must bring the gift of ourselves as we encounter Christ alive and present in people of all ages, races, and stations, and in all the vulnerable, marginalized, defenseless people of our world.

Christ is also manifest today in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, which we struggle in faith to recognize as his Body and Blood. Christ is there when we turn to him in confident prayer and in those times when we find ourselves without words and on the point of despair. He is with us in the quiet of our hearts and in the throb and cacophony of our cities. But Christ is not ours to hold or keep. He is not us. Paradoxically, he allows us from time to time to experience his absence precisely so that we, his disciples, may learn the importance of bringing his presence to others. That is the Epiphany challenge of our Baptismal Covenant.

Celebrations of the Eucharist in our Church begin with the prayerful acknowledgement, “...To you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.” We recognize that the Lord knows us and has known us from all time and eternity. We, like God’s only Son, are beloved. As we are known in God, so must we now become in our lives the Epiphany of Christ’s presence in our world today, wherever we may be.