

## **EPIPHANY ONE, BAPTISM OF JESUS, YEAR A, JANUARY 8, 2023**

We barely had a Christmas season this year because of how Christmas fell on a Sunday. Even though your Christmas decorations are probably put away and the secular world is already focusing on Valentines day, we forget that Christmas is a season and that the twelve days of Christmas starts on Christmas and ends with Epiphany and the visit of the wisemen. Friday was the Feast of the Epiphany and today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. So, in two short weeks we go from Jesus being an infant to a grown man asking to be baptized.

But I'd like to back up for a moment and remind ourselves that it is only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that we have a birth story of Jesus and that they totally contradict each other. Luke has angels appearing to Mary and then shepherds and Joseph and Mary travelling to Bethlehem where Jesus is born in a stable and laid in a manger. The sheer poetry of this story is magnificent. Its beauty has been captured in all kinds of artistic medium from music to sculpture to paintings.

Now in contrast Matthew's story is dark and filled with jealousy, fearfulness and death. Joseph has a dream where he is told not to divorce Mary but accept her and her child as his own. It's a fearful, trying time for him but he obeys the dream. Then we hear of wisemen seeking Jesus out because they had seen a star and after asking directions from King Herod find him in a house where they present gifts to him. They have a dream to go home a different way because King Herod, in his jealousy and fear, directs the killing of Hebrew babies and so Joseph and Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt to escape the massacre. Jesus becomes a displaced refugee in a foreign country, Egypt, Israel's sworn and symbolic enemy. This is also where Pharaoh, when Moses was born, had unleashed his own infanticide against the firstborn Israelite children but now it has become a refuge for Jesus.

When King Herod died, about 4 BC, Jesus returned from Egypt and settled in the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee, a village that was so insignificant it is barely mentioned. As you can see, we have two very different birth stories that we have meshed together over the years.

In fact, except for Luke's story about the boy Jesus in the temple, there is nothing else we know about him before he began his public ministry. Jesus disappears into historical obscurity for thirty years until his baptism.

But for a moment let's not forget the feast of the Epiphany which was celebrated this past Friday. The Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the wisemen but more to the point it celebrates how they were seeking a new truth. They were seeking a truth that would bring a new light into their world. Because the light of truth has a way of illuminating the darkness we often find ourselves in which may be, sexism, racism, injustice, violence, fear, addictions, unresolved guilt or grief. However, there is a light that seeks to drive away these shadows. It is the light of God's love in Christ, and the light of Christ brings hope and fellowship with God. God's light that shines in the Child is the light at the heart of all life. Epiphany is a story about the light at the heart of everything, at the heart of you, and me.

Which brings me to today's Gospel about Jesus' baptism. All four gospels tell the story about Jesus' baptism but the gospels of Mark and John begin their stories about

Jesus as an adult and with his baptism. After living in anonymity and obscurity for thirty years, Jesus left his family and joined the movement of his eccentric cousin John.

Remember John's father, Zachariah, had been part of the religious establishment as a priest in the Jerusalem temple. John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert. Living on the margins of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Contrary to what we might have expected from such an ascetic man and an austere message, the people flocked to John. Then another shock — Jesus asks to be baptized by John. This is an explicit role reversal. John had predicted that Jesus would baptize *us* with a figurative "baptism of fire." And now Jesus asks John for a literal baptism by water.

With some important stylistic differences, all four gospels include Jesus' baptism by John that state after he was baptized the heavens opened and a dove descended upon him and a voice from heaven said: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

But why did Jesus submit to baptism "for the forgiveness of sin" by John who we consider the lesser? Did he need to repent of his own sins? The earliest witnesses of his baptism asked this very question, because in Matthew's gospel John tried to dissuade Jesus: "Why do you come to me? I need to be baptized by you!" For centuries theologians have argued that there was an "acute embarrassment" about Jesus' baptism.

However, the main focus needs to be on the fact that Jesus' baptism inaugurated his public ministry by identifying with "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem." He identified himself with the faults and failures, the pains and problems, of all the broken people who had flocked to the Jordan River. By wading into the waters with them he took his place beside us. Jesus' solidarity with broken people was confirmed by his baptism. He was entering into this call of God to claim he is there to do the work of God.

Then we're told Jesus saw a vision of the Spirit of God in the form of a dove and heard a voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

We might not have heard those words at our baptism, but those words are still relevant to each one of us today. We are beloved by God and God is pleased with us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Baptism in many respects is not a once in a lifetime deal. Baptism requires that we speak and act like our baptism means something everyday.

It is a lifelong journey. Our baptism is just the formal sacramental beginning of our journey of faith. At our baptism we are figuratively submerged into the waters of a new life in Christ where God calls us alongside Jesus throughout our lifetime to bring about justice and peace here and now.

This whole notion of a lifelong journey is something we forget but it was brought home to me when I visited St. David's Episcopal Church in Page, Arizona five years ago. It is an adobe style church that sits upon the ancestral and traditional lands of the Hopi and Navajo people. Not only is the structure unique where the walls can literally open up to the outside but their baptismal font is a fountain. Upon entering the building there is a simple solid vertical stone with water running down to a basin which is their font. The water is constantly flowing to remind us that our baptismal promises are always flowing in our faith life. Their floor is also adobe colored cement except for a river of blue that runs from the base of the font to the outside. It is a reminder that our faith is infused with

the living, life-giving water of baptism and symbolic that our faith goes with us as we leave our sacred spaces and go out into the world.

Today we reaffirm our baptismal covenant because baptism should be life changing that reignites the love of God in us. The church gives us this celebration of Jesus' baptism every year, maybe in the hope that it will make us think again about our own baptism. In our baptism we were brought into an intimate relationship with a loving God. You are God's beloved child which means we are to love as God loves and to see each other as the beloved children of God. Like the Magi, we have the choice to journey toward the light of God or stay stuck wherever we are. Just as the star sent the magi on a journey to discover unexpected truths about God's love let us now renew our baptismal commitment so we too can not only find unexpected truths about God but bear witness to the light and love of God in both word and deed. Amen.