

Mark 1: 4-11 Baptism, His and Ours

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Last Sunday, which is already "last year," we prayed the Litany for Epiphany as the Prayers of the People, because I said we would be missing out on the Epiphany Sunday when we traditionally hear the story of the wise men from the East coming to pay homage to the newborn king. Epiphany is January 6, and today is the Epiphany Sunday, but this year, today is also the Sunday to remember the Baptism of the Lord Jesus, which we traditionally do on the first Sunday after Epiphany. So, I said, we're missing out on Epiphany! Well, I was only half right, or half wrong.

While those of us in the Western Church treat the story of the wise men from the East as the Epiphany story, when for our brothers and sisters in Christ in the Eastern Church, Epiphany is the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord, and not of the infant Jesus, but of the fully grown Jesus. So, getting in step with our Eastern sister churches, we are celebrating Epiphany today after all, with the story of Jesus's baptism.

Perhaps you're thinking, why is she so hung up on this Epiphany thing? What's the big deal? Well, I got excited when I learned that the Baptism of the Lord IS the Epiphany in the Eastern tradition, because it makes difference in the way we hear the story; it enriches and informs our meaning making of the stories of Jesus's life.

Before I say this, let me make sure there are no children listening: We don't believe in the Christmas story, or actually the two nativity stories, in the way children believe in Santa Clause, that is, as a historical fact. Even though the adults in the Children's Ministry go a great length to make the Christmas pageant a seamless story, we know the Gospel writers Matthew and Luke tell two quite separate stories. Just to touch on the highlights, in Luke, Angel Gabriel

comes to Mary in the annunciation scene whereas in Matthew, an unnamed angel of the Lord tells Joseph in the dream after Mary is already with the child. Luke has the couple travel from their hometown of Nazareth to Bethlehem and back to Nazareth, whereas in Matthew, the couple were at home in Bethlehem to begin with. When the wise men came to pay homage to the baby Jesus in Matthew, they didn't find Jesus in a manger between the ox and lamb as the Shepherds in Luke's story did; they found him at his house, in Bethlehem. Matthew would then have the family escape to Egypt for fear of King Herod, and when it was safe, the angel told Joseph again in a dream to go back and they made Nazareth their new home.

The Gospel writers were story weavers; they wove stories of the traditions that had been told of Jesus, not for our entertainment or to trick or deceive us, but for our engagement in the meaning making of their stories, in order that we might come to know the sacred truth about Christ, that is beyond our understanding of worldly things. Through their stories, they are telling us of heavenly things, in our language of worldly things, in order that we may believe the sacred truth, the ultimate reality that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

So back to Epiphany. Epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation." Of what? Of the divine truth of heavenly things. In our Western tradition, the story of the wise men is Epiphany, because that story reveals, or shows us, the truth that Jesus was born as the savior not just of Israel but of the world; when the wise men from the East came looking for Jesus to worship him, the savior was revealed to the world beyond Israel, for those wise men were gentiles, non-Jews of other nations.

So also, the Baptism of the Lord as an Epiphany story reveals to us a sacred truth that bears on all of us. We heard the first part of today's reading about John the Baptist already in the 2nd Sunday of Advent, echoing the call of Prophet Isaiah to prepare the way of the Lord. And John himself says "the one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." What's new in today's reading is the next part "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." John says, "one greater than me is coming after me," and Jesus appears.

This is how Jesus makes entry in Mark's Gospel. Mark doesn't tell us anything about Jesus's birth or childhood. So Jesus' Baptism is Mark's nativity story, in a sense, because it's the beginning of Jesus's participation in the world of flesh. Mark says "all the people from the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem" came. For Jesus, baptism by John in the Jordan River

was where he chose to join the rest of the humanity, and for the rest of the humanity, John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was where they came to turn their lives around, that is, to repent from the way of the world and start following the way of God. In Baptism, Jesus' life and our lives converge.

John's baptism was the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but a better translation might be "repentance into" the forgiveness of sins. John's Baptism of Repentance is not a means to escape judgment; rather it is a sign of God's acceptance who has already forgiven us. Baptism is a sign of God's love that's already there, expressed in the way we can experience it. It is not a condition or a requirement for God's forgiveness. Our decision to become baptized does not cause God to turn gracious and forgive us, nor is God's forgiveness God's response to our being Baptized. Rather, Baptism is a sign that God loves us as children and desires that we experience God's love and let that love rule our lives.

Jesus joined humanity by going down into the water, and as soon as he came out of the water, God claimed Jesus saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved." Mark describes this as Jesus's own experience with no mention of other witnesses; Jesus is the only one who saw the heavens open and the Spirit descend, and only he heard the divine voice which addressed him directly as "You." As the readers, we are let in on Jesus's divine identity as God's Son, and this is how the story is Epiphany to us, but the characters in Mark's story seem unaware of what is happening.

Even though John talked about "one greater than him" was coming, there is no mention of any interaction between John and Jesus; John may not have even recognized Jesus among all those people he was baptizing. For all we know, Jesus just "slipped in" the line of those who were waiting for their turn to be baptized, which reminds us of the last line from the Christmas Poem we read last week as we lit the Christ Candle: "So he, the Lord of Light, the Prince of Peace the King of Love came down and *crept in beside us.*" Jesus "crept in besides us," unnoticed by others. And how Jesus crept in beside us, was not as a baby in a manger, wedged between the ox and a lamb, but as he took his place among us, to be baptized by water like the rest of us.

But this gentle expression of "crept in" may not exactly describe Jesus' entry into our world, because as soon as Jesus came out of the water, the heaven torn open and the Holy Spirit descended. At that moment, the longing of generations of God's people Israel was fulfilled. On the First Sunday of Advent, we heard the prophet Isaiah's cry, expressing the longing of the

people, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Remember hearing those words? Well, God finally did, in the person of Jesus, Mark wants us to know.

In Jesus, the longing of the people for the nearness of God and the longing of God to reach out to God’s children met. Baptism unites us with Jesus who committed to walk the way of God on the dusty earthly road with us, in his sandals, and baptism unites us with one another as siblings of the household of God. “You are my Child, the Beloved.” These were God’s words to Jesus but Mark lets us in on it, for they are God’s words to us, too, because Jesus had joined his fate with ours in his baptism.

So, what is revealed in this Epiphany story of the Baptism of the Lord? That in Baptism, as Jesus went down in the water, he joined humanity, and as he came out of the water, humanity was claimed as God’s children. This is the sacred truth about our lives: we are God’s in Jesus’s name, and that Baptism creates the community of those who are committed to follow Christ.

The church continues this ritual in the sacrament of Baptism. John Calvin, who gave our Reformed church its theological shape said, Sacrament (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper) is a visible sign of invisible grace.

In Mark’s Gospel, those who had come to be baptized by John, have yet to discover that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. They will discover this truth by listening to what Jesus says and by watching what he does, and ultimately how he lived and died. We, too, will discover what it means to be children of God as we learn what it means to follow Christ in our broken and fearful world.

Jesus was not empowered by the Spirit to enjoy the benefits of the Spirit of Power privately but to pass it on to us. He is the one to baptize us with the Spirit, that we may be empowered to follow his path in our world. Wherever we see darkness, we’ll go there because Jesus has gone there. Wherever we see brokenness, we will work for wholeness that is God’s peace, shalom. Wherever we see hatred, we will reflect God’s Love. That’s the life we are empowered to live, when we are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.