

Scriptures: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

## Epiphany

Earlier this week the Church celebrated Epiphany, the holiday that remembers the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child as recorded in Matthew's gospel. Epiphany comes from the Greek language, and can be translated as "the light shines forth," or simply, "the light shines." It refers to the manifestation of some light, which could be knowledge, understanding, or even relationship. The Magi – found only in the second chapter of Matthew's gospel – accurately represent the world coming to see something of significance in the Child of Bethlehem, even when those closest to Him didn't recognize Him. Even the Magi themselves didn't know to Whom they were bowing in worship to, referring to Him simply as, "the One who has been born King of the Jews," (Matt. 2:2). There are times when that happens yet today. People don't realize Who we're worshiping, and they're looking at us as His followers to see if there's anything of significance in the Light we claim to follow. Sometimes even the best of us lose sight of the Light we say we follow. I want to talk more about Him, about Jesus Christ, and look at a familiar passage with you on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, found in Luke's gospel. I'll be reading from the New International Version. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 3:15-17, 21-22. **Read Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.**

During the eight weeks following Epiphany, in the season of Epiphany, or Ordinary Time on the Church calendar, we actually focus on three epiphanies. The one we're most familiar with, which we've already talked about earlier today, features in many of our Nativity scenes during the Christmas season. It's when the wise men followed the light of the star to find Jesus. During this season there are two other revelatory events in Scripture – epiphanies, if you will – which identify Jesus as God's Son and we'll be looking at them as well. Today's gospel reading, about Jesus' baptism is the second, and eight weeks from today, we'll talk about the third. That being the transfiguration of Christ on the mountaintop, on Transfiguration Sunday.

Notice the first thing we read today in the gospel account. "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ," (Luke 3:15). People were waiting expectantly. They wanted the Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed, to come. They were looking forward to Him coming. Why were they "waiting expectantly?" Looking forward to the Messiah's coming? They thought – they believed in their heart of hearts – that the Messiah would come and send Rome packing, and usher in a golden age for the Jewish people. They anticipated that He would be a freedom fighter who would deliver them from foreign oppression by leading change with the point of a sword. Apparently, some of them even thought that John the Baptist was the one!

## **Not Worthy**

John sets them straight real fast. “John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire,’ (3:16) Luke records. John the Baptist is an interesting character in the Bible. He’s Jesus’ cousin, so was also descended from King David. He knew how to get under people’s skin, too! He hung out in the desert, preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4, paraphrased), dressed in camel’s hair, and ate locusts and wild honey (Matt. 3:4, paraphrased). He sounds like a weird, and interesting guy – someone we could sit and have a long chat with at Men’s breakfast! And he’s got quite a following – people are talking, they’re saying he’s the one! “It’s not me,” he’d say today, “there’s someone coming who’s even greater than me.” John the Baptist even goes so far as to say, in a nutshell, that he’s not worthy to untie Jesus’ shoes.

He’s like Peter in the boat – you know this story in Luke 5 – they’ve been out fishing all night, and haven’t even gotten a tug on the nets. Jesus comes along, asks Peter to take Him out in his boat so He can teach the crowd, and Jesus tells him, put the nets out. Peter protests because they’d been out all night, they were tired – but he listens to the Lord, and does it anyhow, and ends up catching so many fish that the boat starts sinking and another boat has to come to their rescue. Peter sees this, and falls at Jesus’ feet, and says, “Go away from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). Peter knew his proper place in regards to Jesus Christ, and it’s obvious that John the Baptist did, too.

And you know, friends, that’s right about us, too. Our proper place in regards to the risen Savior isn’t one where we presume to be of equal status to Him – He’s God, and we aren’t. The proper place for us is at His feet, recognizing our need for His amazing grace and love, and singing praises to Him for it. You’ll run into people – maybe you already have – who have this air of superiority, “holier-than-thou,” so to speak. I’ll level with you – I’ve been there. I’ve been that guy. When we get like that, if I get like that – look out! Because it means we’re on a slippery slope sliding away from our Savior and getting nowhere fast!

## **Trials by Fire**

John the Baptist tells the people asking if he’s the one, that Jesus – who is the One who comes – He’s going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Sometimes we go through “trials by fire,” don’t we? A few months ago I took on a leadership role in the community and went through a “trial by fire.” There was discord over who should be allowed to enter a facility. That’s what the whole thing boiled down to. Who should be allowed to attend public events in our facilities? If we’re talking about here at New Hope – every single person who comes through those doors is welcome here. Period. If we say we love and follow Jesus Christ – and we do – then we love other people without regard to \_\_\_\_\_, and you fill in the blank.

Race. Over 200 years ago the Church in America split over the issue of race, specifically, over the issue of whether the Constitution – and the Bible – gave a person the right to own another human being as property. The Methodist movement created by John Wesley is still fractured into United Methodists, African Methodist Episcopalians, African Methodist Episcopal Zionists, Christian Methodist Episcopalians, and the list goes on – fractured decades ago by racism. Friends, there are still segregated churches. Black churches, White churches, when they just ought to be churches.

Lifestyles. It's been a hot button issue longer than I realized. Some churches think people living different lifestyles shouldn't be allowed in the church. This includes homosexuality, pre-marital relationships, drug abuse, alcoholism, mental illness. They have a mindset of, "come back when you get yourself straightened out." That's wrong on many levels! The Church should be the place they can come to experience the depth of God's love, without judgment – because "we've all sinned, and fall short of God's glory," to paraphrase a part of one of Paul's letters (Rom. 3:23). It's all very sad. When you look at these issues that divide people – in every instance – they are due to an unwillingness to let go of selfish motives, and to follow the Light which they proclaim to follow in worship.

Luke says that John told the crowd, "His [the Messiah's] winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire," (Lk. 3:17). And that's what happened. By Christmas break, the discord I previously mentioned had settled down, and the wheat was sifted from the chaff! I wholeheartedly believe that's what we're seeing, even now, in the Church and in the world. There's a "sifting" taking place. He's separating out the wheat from the chaff. It's good to know we're the wheat! Amen!

## **Well Pleased**

We skip a few verses in Luke's account, and then pick back up at verses 21 and 22, where he says, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased.'" It's interesting that in Luke's description of the event, the baptism hardly figures in at all. "When the people were being baptized, Jesus was, too." That's it. Over the centuries, the Church also faced division over the issue of baptism – should a person be sprinkled, immersed, or have water poured over them? Who's authorized to administer this sacrament? Is it even a sacrament? From a Methodist standpoint, it is, there's a proper protocol that's used to administer it, and a designated person who should preside over it.

Luke doesn't tell us how John the Baptist did Jesus' baptism, or if he was qualified to do it, just that it happened. Why is Jesus there in the first place? John was

preaching a baptism of repentance, yet Jesus, God-with-us, was sinless. He's living, breathing Perfection wrapped in human flesh. So why is He there? Maybe Jesus went to John to be baptized because He was fully entering – fully invested – in the messy world we live in. A world not of our making – we barely understand it at best, and cannot explain it at worst. It's a world that needs repentance, which is a corporate need as much as an individual one. What we see in our text today is Jesus striding into the river to be buried up to His neck in the sin of this world, and then to rise up to the Spirit. He doesn't approve of the brokenness of the world, but He embraces it anyways. He made it His and carried it with Him – all along the Via Dolorosa. And He bore it completely on the cross on Good Friday.

What did Christ say on that day, when He embraced all that's wrong in this life? Everything that's less than divine, everyone who's not holy? He didn't say anything. Like us, He was silent. Friends, He knows better than anyone what we experience when we have no words to say in the face of death – or worse. At the baptism of the Lord there were words spoken that day. Not by Jesus, or by people, but by God the Father. They were God's words, and they simply said, "I love You." They were words of affirmation – not for deeds done, or not done – but just for being. "I love you." Words to hear in the midst of darkness, words we can cling to in the midst of doubt. In the chaos and turmoil of living and dying, we hear – and by grace – we speak these words. "I love you."

God tells us this, time and time again. "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior," (Isa. 43:1b-3a). Perhaps some of the things that we view as nonnegotiable issues, are in reality, so minute in God's great plan, that they aren't really worth spending much time at all bickering over in the first place. Our actions should be having an impact that adds Light to the lives of those image-bearers. An old Sunday School song says, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red, and yellow, black, and white, they are precious in His sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world." Every person is His image-bearer, no matter how flawed they are!

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father, You call us with Your voice of flame to be Your people, faithful and courageous. As Your beloved Son embraced His mission in the waters of baptism, inspire us with the fire of Your Spirit to join in His transforming work. We ask this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.