

Scriptures: Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 1:4-11

Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord

This is an interesting weekend in the life of the Church. Yesterday, January 6, was Epiphany. We heard that account from Matthew's gospel earlier this morning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, epiphany, in its simplest sense, means, "a manifestation of a divine or supernatural being." You can bet that the Magi viewed Jesus as divine. Matthew tells us when they found Him, "they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh," (Matt. 2:11).

The part we didn't read, which usually falls on the Sunday after Christmas, is the section immediately after in Matthew's gospel, which speaks of Herod's slaughter of the innocents. In that story, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod's deadly grasp. Because the Magi didn't return to him to tell Herod where to find the One born "King of the Jews," Herod ordered the massacre of all male children age two and under in Bethlehem and the surrounding countryside.

It's a sad episode recorded in the Gospel; one which shows us that prejudice, greed, and a desire to maintain power at all costs causes many to suffer. The crisis between Israel and Hamas in Gaza boils down to the same sort of thing. Today is also a notable day in the life of the Church, because each year around this time we examine one of the gospel accounts of the baptism of the Lord. This year, we're looking at Mark's record of this important event.

As Jesus' public ministry begins, He remains a somewhat mysterious figure. Like a good spy, or stealthy detective, Jesus plays things close to the vest and reveals things only when He is ready. Over the next six weeks, we'll see Jesus begin to reveal Himself more and more – while at the same time insisting on keeping His identity a secret. One of the most basic questions of Christianity is this: "Who is Jesus?" This is what we'll begin to answer this morning as we look at Mark 1:4-11. **Read Mark 1:4-11.**
John the Baptist

Today's Scripture from Mark's gospel clearly marks the beginning, or jumping off point of Jesus' earthly ministry. Like a good movie – or book – Mark doesn't get right to the point. He includes many twists and turns, which make the story more interesting to the original audience, and to us. Instead of talking about Jesus, we see that Mark actually starts out by talking about Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Mark writes, "And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem

went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River,” (Mark 1:4-5).

I want to pause and point this out, just so we’re all clear – baptism as a sign of repentance was being done before the Church existed. Right here in Mark’s gospel are the two verses to prove it. The Jews, and other religions used baptism long before the Church did. With the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, baptism took on a new layer of meaning – being buried with Christ in the waters, and rising to new life in Him – and that’s when the Church took on the Sacrament of Baptism. Besides the baptism of Jesus Christ, the other one which stands out is from Acts, where Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).

Mark even gives us a description of how John the Baptist dressed, and what he ate. “John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey,” (Mark 1:6). How does that sound? Would you be willing to let someone dressed in camel’s hair, who ate grasshoppers and honey hold you under the water? I suspect there were a lot of the religious elite of the day who thought John the Baptist was a real weirdo.

But, John had a great, and honest message! “And this was his message: ‘After me comes the One more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,’” (verses 7-8). We don’t know how long John the Baptist had been living this way, calling people to repentance, and baptizing them. And then, Jesus shows up along the banks of the Jordan River.

The Baptism of Jesus

Mark also records what happens at the baptism. He writes:

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming out of the water, He saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased,’” (verses 9-11).

In doing this, Mark gives us a teaser of sorts, for all we will discover about Jesus later on. After Jesus is baptized, the heavens split open, the Spirit comes down and lands on Him in the form of a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven. In any good story, the reveal is necessary for moving the plot along. Through Mark’s account of the baptism of the Lord, we’re invited to hear the message that Jesus is the Son of God. What’s not so clear is what Jesus’ being the Son of God means for us. We receive just enough information to pique our curiosity to decide to follow along – or not – as the story of Jesus unfolds in the Gospel.

In many churches this morning, people are being called to remember their baptism. I'll invite you to do that momentarily. What does Jesus' baptism, recorded by Mark, tell us about our own? Is it the beginning? If so, the beginning of what? Maybe for us, like Jesus, the big reveal is yet to come. Meanwhile, we are invited to journey with Him, and fellow believers, to discover new surprises along the way. Maybe when we encounter the new surprises, we'll receive epiphanies – large and small – not only about ourselves, but also about the God who loved us so much He sent His own Son to die on the cross to redeem us and reconcile us to Himself.

As important as what baptism is – it's a sacrament of the Church – the journey ahead is what matters most. It's a journey that's not meant to be traveled alone, but together in community. I have a Facebook friend who was a camp counselor for me when I went to Camp Christian in junior high school. She had a post on Friday night, which said, "So you don't want to go to His house on earth, yet you expect to live in His mansion in heaven?? Think about that statement!" Well, that does make you think, doesn't it?

Baptism Isn't the Final Reveal

Only in community can we share our lives with each other, and encourage each other along the way. Last winter, Kendra, the girls, and I went down to Tennessee over Christmas break. We had hoped to unpack in the cabin we had booked months earlier, and spend the week off the grid – hiking and taking in God's creation in the Great Smoky Mountains. Of course, you know, that didn't pan out – the pipes busted and we ended up cabin-hopping each day for the next five days. Anyhow, the Great Smoky Mountains are part of the larger Appalachian Mountain chain. They have a trail that runs through there – the Appalachian Trail – which runs from Georgia in the south, to Maine in the north. Hikers show up on the trail, with backpacks full of gear, and many attempt to travel the trail all on their own.

While it's remote, they aren't alone. Many people who have taken the 2000 some odd mile hiking trail speak of "trail angels," good Samaritans who know just when to show up with food, water, transportation, or medical supplies, while hikers are near the point of desperation and exhaustion. These encounters provide them with strength and encouragement to "keep on, keepin' on."

Our baptism is not the final reveal. It's simply a stop on the human-transformation trail we are all on. For Jesus, it was one significant moment that revealed just enough of His identity to cause us – and other of His followers – to start the journey of getting to know Him more. The sacrament of Baptism is one visible reminder that we have been adopted into the family of God. It reminds us, too, that where we are going – in community together – is more important than where we have been. I'm going to say a prayer, and then invite you to reaffirm your baptismal vows.

Prayer: Holy God, Creator of light and herald of goodness, at the waters of His baptism You proclaimed Jesus Your beloved Son. With the baptized of every time and generation, may we say yes to Your call to repentance and be led to the life of abundance we experience in Your kinship and Your love. Amen.

The Congregational Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant may be found on page 30 of the United Methodist Hymnal or online at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/book-of-worship/the-baptismal-covenant-iv>