

Sermon for Epiphany/Baptism  
Sunday, January 8, 2023  
“Epiphany & Baptism: Revelation & Responsibility”

Text: Matthew 2:1-12; 3:13-17; Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:10

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. [...] [Some years later] Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, 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, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Today we are celebrating the Solemnity of the Epiphany in the Octave of the Epiphany and the Baptism of Our Lord. The Epiphany of Our Lord is also known as the Manifestation of Our Lord to the Gentiles and actually occurred this past Thursday and signals the end of the 12 days of Christmas and the beginning of the Season of Epiphany, or Epiphanytide. Because the Epiphany is so important a holy day, we can transfer its celebration to the following Sunday. But, the Sunday after the Epiphany is appointed to celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord, another very important holy day. Both commemorations celebrate important moments where the revelation and manifestation of God to humanity occurred. It is not inappropriate to celebrate both events together. The Epiphany commemorates the arrival of the Magi to the baby Jesus and is a revelation of things from above. It is celebrated as a separate festival in the Western Church. In the Eastern Church, on the other hand, the Baptism of Jesus is celebrated along with the arrival of the magi, and is called the “theophany.” A theophany is a revelation of God to humankind. At the Epiphany, the arrival of the three magi or kings, representing Europe, Africa, and Arabia, according to tradition, meant that the Messiah’s presence in the world was recognized by Gentiles. At the Baptism of Jesus, a voice from heaven declared to the world that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the Anointed One. Four important events mark Epiphanytide: the arrival of the Magi at the crib of the baby Jesus, the Baptism of Our Lord, both of which we celebrate today; the first miracle of Jesus at the Wedding at Cana, but as we are in Year A in our lectionary cycle, we will not read that story from the Gospel of St. John; and, the season is capped off at the end with the story of the Transfiguration, yet another epiphany.

The story of the Epiphany is notable because in it is told of the arrival of the three wise men, or magi, or kings. They traveled from far away to Judea to pay homage to the infant Jesus whom they predicted was a king, because they observed a star “at its rising.” Many English biblical translations say they observed a star “in the east” but in the original Greek, Matthew’s telling of the story says the magi saw the star at its rising in the eastern sky just before dawn. Modern astronomers have tried to figure out what

the sky might have looked like on that day and what the magi might have seen. The wise men were astrologers. They read the stars. Perhaps they *were* kings, but whoever they were, they were wise and they read the stars. They looked for signs in the stars. But real stars move too slowly for a human being to perceive within one's lifetime. In fact, the stars move so slowly that the constellations that we see in the night sky have not changed significantly since humans have existed, which according to *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* is somewhere between 160,000 and 90,000 years. So, it wasn't an actual star that led the wise men to Jesus; rather, they were looking at the movement of the planets in our solar system. If you study the sky, we can see their movement happening every night.

The wise men believed that certain planetary alignments served as signs of significant events that were to happen here on earth. Where the Bible tells us that they were observing the eastern sky, they were looking for the reappearing of a "star" at dawn, or the morning star. It is the brief moment when we can see the reflection of a planet in the light of the morning sun, just before the light of the sun breaks over the horizon and floods the earth with light, obscuring all of the planets and stars until the evening. The planets move relative to earth and to each other, and because we're all circling around the sun, sometimes the movement of the planets seems to stop. Jupiter, the largest of the planets, is easily visible to the naked eye. In ancient times, Jupiter was considered to predict major events, like the birth of royalty. What the wise men were looking for was just the right alignment when the planet Jupiter stopped to change its direction, the sun was in a particular sign of the zodiac, and the rest of the planets were aligned in a specific pattern. When that occurred, they believed that a great king had been born. That's what prompted them to set out to find him. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Arise, shine! For your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you. Nations will stream to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawning." The Hebrews were waiting for a sign to herald the coming of the Messiah. The Epiphany is a theophany, which is a manifestation of the fullness of God to humankind and we became aware of the presence of God.

When they arrived, the wise men found the infant Jesus and fell on their knees to pay homage. They each gave him a gift: gold, the symbol of royalty, to symbolize his kingship; frankincense, a symbol of ritual purity, to symbolize his royal and eternal priesthood; and, myrrh, a substance burned along with incense at the time of death, to foreshadow his burial. Symbols by which the magi declared that they recognized who Jesus was.

Today, we are also celebrating the Baptism of Our Lord. Our Christian baptism has its historical roots in a Jewish purity ritual in which an individual after first repenting of his sins would mark that change of life by being immersed in a pool of water called a *mikvah* with the help of a baptizer. St. John the Baptist was a baptizer who preached a message of repentance and then baptized the penitent person to wash them clean of his/her sins, which stretch all the way back to the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden

of Eden. Immersion in the *mikvah* had the power of transformation, to cause a spiritual metamorphosis and returning to God, known as *teshuvah*, also called a *metanoia*, which means a turning back toward God. Our Christian understanding of baptism includes the washing away or death of our sins and rebirth into new life in Jesus Christ and adoption as members of the Christian family, the Church.

Now you may be wondering if Jesus was the incarnation of God in the world, and therefore without sin, why would Jesus need or want to be baptized? Obviously, Jesus was not baptized in order to remove the stain of the sin of Adam and Eve or make him a member of his own self. In Jesus's case, his baptism was the means by which a revelation of the divine could occur; at his baptism "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, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In that moment, the fullness of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—was present among humankind and revealed for all the world to see and know. It was also a hearkening back to creation when the spirit of God swept across the waters and the Word of God said, "Let there be light." By contrast, at our baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the outward and visible sign of water confers upon us the inward and spiritual grace of union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, the forgiveness of sins, and new life through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are "christified," as the Eastern Orthodox Church calls it; we are made, or transformed, into one like Christ.

In baptism, we become a part of the Body of Christ. It is the initiatory step to the Christian life and is the wellspring from which all other sacraments flow. That is why we don't offer the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist to persons who have not yet been baptized. In order to receive and partake of the real Body of Christ in the Eucharist, one must have been adopted into the body through Baptism. After the sermon today, instead of proclaiming our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, we will renew the vows we take at baptism in the Episcopal Church. Our tradition forces us to make promises at our baptism that must shape our Christian life. Someone listening right now may be hearing these words for the first time or may not yet be baptized; these words form the foundations of our Christian faith and should be taken seriously, because they are good practices for all people in general.

Those promises carry much responsibility. Baptism isn't just something that gets done. It isn't simply a traditional ritual that we do to babies so we can dress them up in fancy gowns and have a party afterward. Baptism begins a lifelong process of learning and being. As members of the Body of Christ, we are all required to live out our Christian belief daily and to share the good news of Christ. That involves two important elements: worship and work. At the Epiphany, the Magi bowed down and worshipped the King of kings. Our worship is always directed toward God. Herod wanted to get rid of Jesus, because he worshipped himself. We must always avoid worshipping ourselves. Our modern world spends too much time focusing on the self. Too many

people in our modern world spend too much time worshipping themselves, material things, money, fame, and even other human individuals. Yet, in our crazy world, people are seeking peace in their lives. We live in a chaotic world that throws us all kinds of curve balls. We seek peace in the midst of the chaos. That kind of peace only comes from knowing God—knowing that there is something bigger than ourselves and our world. Baptism admits us into a community of believers that seek peace through the Prince of Peace. We depend, not on the self, but each other for love and support, and we depend upon God.

But baptism requires work; it's not a passive action. We don't just sit on our laurels after we're baptized, we must go out into the world and make this world a better place, make it more loving for our neighbor and ourselves to be loving to each other. It all starts with even the simplest of actions. Showing love and respect in our daily lives and taking our baptismal vows seriously are good places to start. At the beginning of the mass we heard the Summary of the Law, which says that we must love God first and love our neighbor as ourselves. We must love all three: God, our neighbor, and ourself. It isn't always easy to do. We achieve it through the help of God and with the support of the whole body of Christ. That's why the Church is important; it is the means of support of the Christian life, which is communal, not individual.

So, as we celebrate the Epiphany and Christ's baptism today, we must keep our eyes looking eastward, to the morning star that shines so brightly, to the one who saves us, and his light that burns deeply within us. We humans are all born fallen men and women because of the fall of Adam and Eve, but through baptism, we become renewed creatures, restored to wholeness with God through Jesus Christ who is the new Adam. By our baptism we become partakers of the divine nature of God. From our baptism, we are given the charge to proclaim to the world that God, indeed, exists and dwells in a tumultuous, broken, and fallen world. That is a beautiful message, especially when the issues of daily life bring us down and trouble our spirits. That is a message that the world needs to hear. No matter what, we are all loved by God, we deserve respect, we are equal in the sight of God, and we will receive his infinite goodness, mercy, and forgiveness. Amen.

### Resources

"Can astronomy explain the biblical star of Bethlehem?" <http://theconversation.com/can-astronomy-explain-the-biblical-star-of-bethlehem-35126>

Quote by Pope Francis from the sermon preached in the Sistine Chapel on January 8, 2017 for the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. (EWTN live broadcast)