



photo credit: John Reitzel taken during the snowstorm on January 6, 2024

### Sermon: The Epiphany/Baptism of our Lord

Based on the scripture lessons for January 6 - 7, 2024

Isaiah 60 1 - 6

Psalm 72

Ephesians 3: 1 - 12

Matthew 2: 1 - 12

Genesis 1: 1 - 5

Psalm 29

Acts 19: 1 - 7

Mark 1: 4 - 11



This weekend's scripture is all about divine revelation - beginning with the creation story in Genesis - when God created light from darkness and declared that the light was good. I wonder if the designers at Longwood Gardens had the Epiphany in mind when they created this year's Christmas theme of lights and displays called "Illumination". My family and I toured the gardens and the conservatory on Friday night - the Twelfth Day of Christmas and the day before the Christmas show ends. The magic of brightly lit trees against the darkened sky creates an image I won't soon forget. As I toured the Gardens, I kept thinking of the Genesis lesson when God created the world and separated light from the darkness.

photo credit: Kathryn Harris  
@ Longwood Gardens  
January 5, 2024

From the third prophet of Isaiah, "Arise and Shine, for your light has come....you shall see and be radiant your heart shall thrill and rejoice because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

And then, predicting the future arrival of the Magi centuries in the future:

“They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

The birth of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas is further enhanced as the miracle that it was by the arrival of the Magi as depicted in the Gospel of Matthew. Born under the threat of extinction by King Herod, the baby Jesus escaped death when the Magi went home another way. He lived to be baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. (Mark 1: 4-11). As soon as he left the water, the heavens were torn apart and the Spirit descended like a dove upon him.

God’s voice came from above: “You are my Son with whom I am well pleased.”

It’s important to understand that we don’t read the scripture lessons in chronological order. Nor do we have a sense of the elapsed time between Jesus’ birth and his baptism by John.

Theology professor Lee Barrett from LTS explains that “the bestowal of the Spirit upon Jesus is crucial for traditions (like ours) that stress God’s sanctifying grace.” Jesus did not receive the spirit for his own purposes. Rather, he received the Holy Spirit in order to share it with others.

“The church has claimed that Jesus underwent baptism so that we might commune with him in baptism and share his empowerment by the Spirit.”

When we say we are marked as Christ’s own for ever during our baptism liturgy, this is what we are imparting - the grace of God and the love of Christ will remain with the baptized forever.

One of Dr. Barrett’s favorite theologians was the late Karl Barth who maintained that “God’s claiming of Jesus ... summarizes the essence of the Gospel: the astonishing claim that God does not want to remain hidden in the heights of heaven

but descends to the depths of earthly life in order to be seen and heard by us as finite creatures.” (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, 1958)

Think about that. God revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus. He imparted his grace to Jesus who in turns imparts Grace to each one of us. We are commanded to love one another as Christ loves us.

At the transfiguration, this statement from above, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 9:7) is repeated. God really meant it, didn't he?

During his trial, Christ accepted the title of Son of God, which led to his crucifixion. His acceptance of his divine nature put him on the path to the Cross which truly defined what Son means.

As Christians, we carry Christ's cross and endure suffering obediently like Jesus. Jesus was crucified with other sinners. His humility is evident even during his baptism when he succumbs to the same ritual that John the Baptist used for people seeking forgiveness and redemption for their sins.

Suffering that leads to the cross  
Release from death by resurrection  
Coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

All these outcomes are ahead of Jesus at the time of his baptism - yet the stage is being set in these early actions and scenes. Once Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit, he can share that spirit with others.

Through baptism Jesus brought the Light of the World to others. The Magi used the light of the stars in the sky to find the baby Jesus, whom a star had told them was born.

The circle is complete.

Next weekend, weather permitting, we will have an opportunity to carry the grace and love of Christ into our homes by chalking our doors. Saint Paul folks may remember when we did that during Epiphany weekend last year. For Saint Luke folks, this may be a new tradition.

It's one that I especially like because it connects our daily worlds to Christ's world and it carries on an ancient Christian tradition. It is among the most ancient of Christian customs to "chalk the door" on the Feast of Epiphany (January 6).

Each year, people gather to bless their home, chalking the year and the initial C, M, and B onto their lintel or just on the top of their front door like this:

20 + C + M + B + 24

"C M B" likely stands for the Latin phrase "Christus mansionem benedicat:" may Christ bless this house – though many claim the initials stand for the legendary names of the Magi: Caspar, Melchior, and Baltasar.

The numbers indicate the year and the + signs are, of course, a symbol of the cross of Christ.

The chalking of the door is an invitation for Christ to be present in our hearts and homes.

It also stands as a reminder to us that our home is a place of refuge and blessing. As the wisemen entered the home of Jesus and found welcome, so should all who enter our homes (including ourselves) find Jesus. Our homes are a haven and a space to know and be known by Christ. (Source: Catechesis Books)

Epiphany is the traditional end of the Christmas season. Here is a poem by Michael Dougherty that inspires our work to bring Christ's like to the world.

### The Work of Christmas Begins

When the carols have been stilled,  
When the star-topped tree is taken down,  
When family and friends are gone home,  
When we are back to our schedules  
The work of Christmas begins:

To welcome the refugee,  
To heal a broken planet,  
To feed the hungry,  
To build bridges of trust, not walls of fear,  
To share our gifts,  
To seek justice and peace for all people,  
To bring Christ's light to the world.

- by Michael Dougherty, a variation on Howard Thurman's 'When the Song of the Angels is Stilled'

May the peace of Christ that passes all understanding be with you now and always.

*Martha+*

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