

In the shape of our Worship Service today, you can see the result of what appears to be two rather separate traditions of the Church smacking up against each other. On the one hand, we have the commemoration of the Feast of the Epiphany, the visit of the Three Kings or Three Wise Men to the infant Jesus, traditionally celebrated on January 6, the day after the twelve days of Christmas. On the other hand, we have the remembrance of Jesus' baptism, which in the long-established Church calendar falls on January 7. The whole thing may seem slightly schizophrenic. Or, at least until we take into consideration the whole season of Epiphany. Like Advent or Lent or Eastertide, Epiphany is a liturgical season that has been a part of the Church's history for centuries. As I noted around this time last year, Epiphany is not just a one-day event but the theme of the whole period between Christmas and the beginning of Lent. The word "epiphany" comes from a Greek word meaning "appearance," which in turn comes from "to show forth" or "to manifest." Nowadays, we use the word to mean "an illuminating discovery." We may talk about having an epiphany about an issue we've been thinking about. Originally, though, epiphany was all about the appearance of a god. Christians appropriated the term to talk about certain key events in Jesus' life when it became apparent to people that he was something special – at the visit of the Magi, at his baptism, at his first recorded miracle in Cana, at his transfiguration. The season of Epiphany has been called "a voyage of discovery about Jesus." The lectionary readings during Epiphany are chosen to help us learn who Jesus is and what his mission is.

So it is actually quite appropriate that the two strands of our worship service come together today, Epiphany and baptism. As I began to think about that conjunction, I couldn't help but think of the combined images so often associated with these stories. For Epiphany, light. As Fr. John Bucki has written, "Epiphany invites us to celebrate the wonderful reality that Jesus came as a light to all people, not just to some subset of the human race." And, for the baptism, of course, water. I love the way that those images play off of each other and together in my memory and imagination. There is very little more beautiful than the reflection of light off water or more mysterious than the interplay of light through water. When I read the Scriptures, I occasionally indulge myself in contemplation of how I might translate a passage visually. It's a sort of extension of the work I used to do as a stage director, imagining the *mise en scene* for a play I was staging or considering. I'm partially inspired in my vision of this scene by Luke's words, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized..." It sounds to me as if Luke is telling us that Jesus baptism came last, perhaps at the tail-end of a long day of preaching and baptizing by John. So, imagine with me, if you will, that scene at the river, as if we were standing and looking out from the east bank. The hot Judean sun is riding low in the sky, a burning ball of fire. Refracted light is reflected up into our eyes from the rippling water, making it hard to distinguish the two figures remaining in the deeper part of the river, John & Jesus. As John dips Jesus into the river and then raises him up, a cloud of droplets fly off Jesus' hair and clothes. The light sparkling off the water in the river and the water in the air make it hard to see where river ends and sky begins. The fiery light is in the water and the water is in the light.

That image of light and water coming together is certainly consonant with the imagery already in use by Luke in his storytelling. In the early chapters of Luke, the image of light is consistently linked with Jesus, who (as John's Gospel records) is the light of the world. In the first chapter of Luke, we have the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth and the birth of John. Upon regaining his power

of speech at the naming of his newborn son, Zechariah waxes eloquent about the goodness of God, the future of his son, and the Messiah of whom he is born to be the prophet. Of that mighty savior, he says, “⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Just a few verses later, Luke gives us another vision of light breaking into darkness: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” By the way, is it just me or does everybody think of Linus VanPelt when they hear those verses? And, just a little further on again, Luke tells the story of Simeon recognizing the baby Jesus for who he truly is: “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” There is good precedent in Luke to associate Jesus with the light.

Of course, in first century Palestine, there was no light without some sort of fire. The sun by day and the stars by night are balls of far-away fire; the moon, a reflected firelight from the sun. Torches, candles, lamps and other fires were the only sources of light controlled by humans. I mention this because there is another strong image in our passage for this morning – that of fire. John tells the crowd who wonder if he might be the Messiah, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” The image raises some hard questions for us. John has already warned his audience, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance... Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” So if our understanding of Jesus as the one who is come to show forth the light of God’s love is correct, what is all of this talk of fire, which sounds so ominous?

The answer, I think, comes if we think of this fire not as a destructive fire but, as we heard in Malachi a few weeks ago, as a refiner’s fire – not punishing or destroying but purifying. All of us have things in our lives that we would best be purged of, whether they are destructive habits or destructive memories. The work of convicting us of the need to purify our lives in this manner and of burning away our personal chaff, belongs to the Holy Spirit, who is of course famously depicted by Luke not just as a dove but as tongues of fire. The work of transformation that Jesus brings into the world is always accompanied by fire – the fire of purification, the fire of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and, as Paul Nuechterlein puts it in his commentary, the fire of love. Nuechterlein consistently calls on his readers to move away from images of divine violence and the lust for sacrifice in order to focus on God’s love. “I would maintain,” he writes, “that the fire which should most closely be connected with the Holy Spirit is a Fire of Love. Jesus came to baptize with that Spirit and that Fire. If it burns away the chaff, it is a Fire of Love that burns away the chaff of our hardness of heart that keeps us enslaved to the sacrificial fires we continue to project onto God... the hope of the Christian faith is that *it is Christ's Fire of Love that will ultimately prove to be the unquenchable fire.*”

Light, fire and, now, water. The presence of the water in this passage leads us to yet another vexing question: What is the light of the world doing in the water to begin with? Why on earth should Jesus, the sinless one, submit to John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? And why should such an act result in this display of God's approval and love?

I believe there are 4 different possible answers and that each has something to teach us this morning. I would categorize Jesus' reasons for baptism as Obedience, Identification, Inauguration and Example. By the way, these categories are not exclusive. The ideas overlap and some of my arrangements are strictly arbitrary. So if you find any of them useful, feel free to rearrange them.

First, obedience: One possibility is that Jesus was baptized by John to fulfill the general call to baptism. Luke 3:2 tells us that the word of God came to John to call all people to repentance and baptism. Jesus heard the call of John and recognized his Father's voice. If all those who wanted to be counted part of the Kingdom of Heaven were to be baptized, then Jesus was going to be there, regardless of whether or not he had sins to repent. For Jesus, meeting the expectations of other humans was not important. It wasn't important to him that John might not want to baptize him (as Matthew records), it wasn't important to him that other people would think he was a sinner with something to repent. It was only important that he was obedient to God's call. So he humbled himself and went down. The great hymn in Philippians tells us that Jesus humbled himself when he took on the form of a slave, his mortal life. Here, he humbles himself again, going down into the valley of the Jordan, one of the lowest points on the face of the earth, down into the water as if he were an ordinary sinner. Just days later, the devil takes him up to the heights, the pinnacle of the temple and the peak of a mountain and tempts him. But Jesus understands that "God's way is humble service; Satan's way is prideful self-service." Once again, Jesus is humble and obedient to the Father. He's not looking to be recognized as King of the World (although of course, he is). He's looking to be the Father's obedient servant. His humble obedience is a striking paradox after the way John has announced his coming as a powerful judge.

Next, Identification: By volunteering for John's baptism, Jesus, the sinless one, stands in solidarity with those who have confessed their sins and not just the ones who have gathered at the banks of the Jordan. Jesus also descends into the water, just as he descended from heaven, to align himself with all humankind, with all of those who will turn away from sin and towards God. In this act of identification, Jesus reminds us that he is fully human as well as fully God. His sinlessness does not separate him from us. On the contrary, it points us toward our own potential. Jesus has fulfilled the potential righteousness of all humanity by his unswerving obedience to God. Remember I John 1:9? "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." We emerge from our own repentance as clean from sin as Jesus. Until we let sin into our lives, we are the crown of God's good creation.

There is a sense of inauguration in Jesus' baptism, a sense of beginnings. Most obviously, it is the beginning of his public ministry. The accounts of his baptism gives us a clear indication of what Jesus' ministry is to be by pointing us back to the words of the prophet Isaiah with his predictions of the obedient suffering servant: In Isaiah 42:1 (which, incidentally is part of the

Old Testament lectionary passage today in Catholic and Episcopal churches), God says “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” Luke records that at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus himself identifies himself with the servant foretold by Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.”

There is also another sense of beginning here: the sense that Jesus has inaugurated the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. His passage through the waters of baptism recalls other important beginnings in the salvation history of Israel. Israel was brought out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and into the Promised Land through the waters of Jordan. So, too, is the new Israel, the community of Christ, brought out of bondage and into abundant life through the waters of baptism. Indeed, all of human kind has received a new beginning before through water. Just as in the story of Noah, a dove brings the good news of salvation to humankind. For Noah, the dove brought an olive branch, a symbol of a fresh start and of peace with God; for Jesus, the dove brought the Spirit and the voice of the Father with a word of love. The Kingdom of God, which Jesus has begun to institute on earth as it is in heaven, is characterized by peace on earth to those in God's kingdom and a realization of God's steadfast, amazing love for all of us. The theologian Henri Nouwen puts it this way: “Jesus heard that voice. He heard that voice when He came out of the Jordan River. I want you to hear that voice, too. It is a very important voice that says, "You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have molded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand and I hold you safe in the shade of my embrace. I hold you. You belong to Me and I belong to you. You are safe where I am. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are.””

Finally, Jesus baptism stands as example to us. Jesus' baptism is a model for Christian baptism. His ministry begins with his baptism and it ends with his Great Commission in Matthew 28 to baptize all nations. Just as Jesus himself institutes the core church tradition of the Lord's Supper by his personal participation, he institutes baptism by his personal participation. Jesus wants all persons in all nations to follow him in baptism and he leads by example. It is for this reason that we Baptists and a few other denominations have insisted that baptism is to be reserved for believers rather than performed on unknowing infants.

How then do we respond? The first response required of us, clearly, is to repent from sins and to follow our Lord in baptism. Most of us here today have taken that step. But although our baptism into the community of believers is a one-time event, repentance is not. We are not yet perfected. We are still working out our salvation with fear and trembling. All of us need to hear the call to turn away from sin on a regular basis because as we grow in Christ, we come to realize that aspects of our lives that had previously seemed innocuous may be separating us from the perfect love of God. The process of walking more and more fully with Jesus will only end when stand before God's throne at the end of our earthly lives.

We are also called to follow Jesus in righteousness. Just as Jesus' baptism marked his entry into public ministry, so our baptism marks our entry not into private Christianity, but into public

witness, into the public mission of Jesus in the world. In accepting, indeed demanding, John's baptism, Jesus took up the mission that John proclaimed. John said that to be a baptized person is to give a coat to anyone who is cold, to provide food for anyone who is hungry, to look out for the weak and the powerless and the hurting. That is the ethic of the baptized. Hear again the words of Isaiah that Jesus later echoed: "The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon US, because the LORD has anointed US to preach good news to the poor. He has sent US to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion - to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." It is time for us to extend the Good News and let all the world know that, like Jesus and like us his followers, they are Beloved. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are the Beloved Community. Imagine what can happen as we extend that community...the sense of Belovedness is enough to change the world.

The water of new beginning in baptism, the unquenchable fire of redeeming love, the epiphanous light of the world, which is Jesus the Christ – all of these come together in creating that Beloved Community. We gather in Jesus' name to share his love with each other, to share God's forgiveness with the world, to share the joy that comes with love and forgiveness. In token of this, we take the bread, we drink the wine, we share the Lord.