

This is Google's definition: Derived from the Greek word epiphaneia, epiphany means "appearance," or "manifestation." In literary terms, an epiphany is that moment in the story where a character achieves realization, awareness, or a feeling of knowledge, after which events are seen through the prism of this new light in the story. (You are the character in this story).

Welcome to Epiphany. We are a few days into it already, but welcome all the same. The Day of Epiphany comes right on the heels of the twelve days of Christmas, and gives way to a season that shares its name. Epiphany will be a long season of seven Sundays that will drop us off at the doorstep of Lent. And it all started on Thursday.

Christians understand the word epiphany and its day specifically. Also from Google: ... a Christian feast day that celebrates the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ. In Western Christianity, the feast commemorates principally the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child.

Epiphany for Christians is about the revelation of God who came into the world. The manifestation or appearance of God is echoed in the gospel of Matthew with the "appearance" of a star. God's appearance in Jesus at Christmas is an event with cosmic significance. The sign of this star pointed the way to the Christ Child, and Mathew tells us of three kings who followed it there. The Maji.

The coming of these three kings is the central story of the Day of Epiphany. This story is central not because they are kings, not because of the gifts they bring. This story is central because it reveals the shape of God's coming salvation of the entire world. Think of the Song of Simeon we heard last week:

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
(which you prepared in the presence of all peoples,)  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.

The word Gentiles is a small word for a big population. It refers to everybody else who's not Jewish. That these kings are among the first to witness the coming of Christ is itself a sign of God's intentions for the world through the life of this child. A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to God's people, Israel.

This is the realization of the Day of Epiphany - the “prism” through which we’ll begin to see Jesus and the events of his story.

But on this first Sunday of Epiphany, we hear nothing of kings. Matthew’s kings recede into the background, while Luke gives us a familiar account of a wilderness baptizer proclaiming repentance and forgiveness. And Luke tells us of the baptism of Jesus.

Matthew’s kings brought us into Epiphany, though, so let’s stick with him for a minute. This is Matthew’s account of Jesus’ baptism:

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 [John] 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.”

Sounds pretty similar to what we heard in Luke, right? The difference though, the singular point of departure Luke takes from Matthew’s account, is that Jesus receives his baptism by John anonymously. He goes completely un-recognized by John who’s talking about this “...one who is more powerful” than he who’s on the way. Jesus, simply another person of the crowd, receives his baptism and goes off to pray. Curious, right?

So Jesus is presumably off on his own when the heavens open, the Holy Spirit descends and the voice from Heaven says, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Why these differences? What is Luke claiming about God in this account?

Permit me an aside here:

“Every word” of each gospel is a claim about who God is and what Jesus has to do with it. Our four gospels are very different from each other and make different claims through their differences. We commonly conflate or join the accounts into one narrative, don’t we. So the wise men are standing with the shepherds around the Holy Family on Christmas Eve, even though that’s not in our scriptures. It’s

not a terrible thing, but resisting that kind of conflation gives us an opportunity to dwell in the differences of each gospel and perhaps hear the claims about God in Jesus particular to each.

In at least one way, it's kind of like church right? I don't for a second assume we believe "the same way" or even the same way. There are different gospels in each of you. Every one of us has a different understanding and experience of the good news that might even depart from scripture sometimes. Encounters with God in your lives were maybe never written, but they join with the scriptures and are part of your gospel - the gospel according to Bev or ... Lutherans lean hard on the word of God, the holy scriptures, in order to keep us centered in the good news of God's grace, justice and love. But Luther wouldn't deny God's ongoing activity in the lives of God's people. And perhaps too, some scriptures help you interpret those divine encounters a little more than others. Do you lean a little heavier toward one gospel than another, for instance? What are the claims about God that are particular to you?

This is the start of another sermon. Maybe we'll do a little exploring of each other's gospels at some point. But for now, back to THIS sermon...

So what is Luke claiming about God in this private, tender moment of divine affirmation for Jesus? In Jesus' anonymity, going un-recognized in the crowd, and this voice of God from heaven speaking to him alone, I believe Luke is saying of God, is hearing God say "I see you. I see you and I love you."

Putting Jesus' baptismal encounter in the light of Epiphany, the epiphany realization of God's intending salvation for not one person, tribe, creed, class, color, sexual orientation or gender identity, but the entire world, I hear Luke handing us these brief verses and saying - here you go, these words to Jesus are God's words for you too.

This is the mystery of baptism. That the words spoken to Jesus in the wake of the water are spoken to each of us. Every one of us, and particularly. In the water and in the words spoken, the baptized might go unrecognized by the world but are each utterly recognized, completely known and particularly loved by God. "I see you," God says, "I see you and I love you, and nothing can change that."

But Pastor Ben, what do you mean when you say "seen"? If God here is really saying "I see you," what does that mean?

A friend of mine this summer had a pretty hurtful experience at work. I happened to be volunteering for this event she'd organized. She'd spent hours recruiting, inviting participants, planning and coordinating, etc. But at a certain point as the event was just starting, her supervisor came over and said, "I'm not satisfied with any of this. I'm taking over."

It wasn't the kind of event where I could easily step in and come to her aid, and I couldn't find her after it was over. So that night I just texted her. I said, "I see you." I knew how hard she had worked, how excited she was for the event and its participants, and how painful it must have been to have had it all suddenly stripped from her minutes before it was set to begin. I said all that and I said, "I see you."

God sees us in what we go through - the bruises, bumps and scrapes we've received in the course of living. God knows the pains, the injuries, the losses and unbearable costs we bear, both for our mistakes and for no reason at all. Claiming us as beloved children, each and all, means God sees us in our particular need, and meets us with particular love. So the shape God's salvation of the entire world promises to take, is not only for all creatures in need of saving, it is for you. "I see this hurting world, and I will save it," God says. "I see you, and I love you, and I will save you too."

The Day of Epiphany was Thursday. The assigned reading for the Day started with Isaiah, chapter 60. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Verse 5 begins like this: "Then you shall see | and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice." Isn't that beautiful?

May you hear these words, and may you believe it.

AMEN