

## **Sermon for January 8, 2023: The Epiphany and The Baptism of Jesus**

Today we celebrate the Epiphany (actually, it was Jan 6) but we celebrate it today. Epiphany marks the arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem. For many, this time of year can be a rather depressing time. This is when all the beautiful decorations and bright lights that gave us such joy during the Christmas season are packed away - leaving our homes feeling, somehow darker and colder.

But Epiphany is really a season of great celebration. In some branches of the church, its celebration is as big as Christmas and Easter. And, on this particular Sunday in our liturgical calendar, we also celebrate a second momentous event in the life of Jesus: his baptism in the River Jordan.

So, it's a two-fer today!! A double celebration! As we reflect on these two events, what might we learn to get us off to a good start in this new year? I'm going to talk about epiphanies and journeys.

Epiphany means a manifestation or an appearance. But, usually, we think about an epiphany as a time when something significant becomes known, a truth is suddenly revealed. We've all had those "Aha" moments when the light dawns and we get clarity on something. What we might not recognize is that when we experience an epiphany, we have probably been on a journey to get to that point; a journey that involved change or transformation. And, of course, the epiphany can then lead to further transformation.

In the story of the wise men, found in chapter two of Matthew's Gospel, I think there were actually two epiphanies. The major Epiphany was that the savior, promised for centuries, had finally been born and was God manifested in fully human form. Immanuel, God with us. Matthew used this story to proclaim both the Kingship and the Divinity of this little baby. The Messiah had come. And, in the lives of those who understood the significance of this epiphany, this appearance of God among us, both then and down through the ages to today, everything is transformed.

But the wise men also had an epiphany. They had journeyed from the East following a guiding star. They knew that they were seeking a very special King whose arrival was being foretold in the heavens. The star led the wise men to a house in Bethlehem where they found Jesus with Mary and Joseph. Matthew tells us, the wise men were overwhelmed with joy; Aha, here is the reason for our journey, a tiny baby born in very humble circumstances. What did that mean? But there was something unique about that baby! The wise men fell down on their knees before him and gave him gifts of gold and the rich perfumes, frankincense and myrrh. And then - they upped and left! A wonderful, strange story. There's so much mythology and science that seeks to explain or validate it further but here's what, I think, is clear. These pagan astrologers had left their homes and travelled probably hundreds of miles, not easy on a camel that only does 20 miles a day, following a guiding star. They were seeking to find the King of the Jews in Bethlehem. But how did they understand who Jesus was. What did it mean to these pagans? Had they been able to read the prophet Isaiah who promised,

as we read this morning, “a light for all the nations” was coming into the world? We aren’t told - but their passionate pursuit had brought them to the feet of Jesus. And a direct encounter with Jesus had to have led to an epiphany in their lives.

This time also marks the beginning of a journey for Jesus. The fully human Jesus was now living among ordinary folk. As a baby, he was rushed off to Egypt, as a refugee, and he lived for a time in the Jewish communities there.

Then they returned to Nazareth to try and build a new life; Joseph had to restart his carpentry business. We know Jesus’ parents were raising him in a loving home and he studied the Torah and that’s all we’re told. But I think we can imagine more that is not written. Did Jesus sense the fear and worry in his parents as they fled Judea and struggled to survive in a foreign country? How difficult was it for this family to rebuild their lives in Nazareth – was there hunger, even homelessness at first? Did Jesus experience resentment or prejudice because he had escaped the massacre ordered by King Herod when most babies of his age had not? I can imagine Jesus as a little boy sweeping up the wood shavings in his father’s carpentry shop, perhaps getting yelled at for not doing his chores. And as a young man, all around him, he would have seen the homeless, the hungry, the sick, and the outcasts. He would have witnessed violent uprisings against their Roman oppressors. And he would have been powerless to anything about any of it. It must have been sad and hard for him.

I think the road has been hard for many of us too, especially since Covid, plus we

are constantly worried about all we see happening in this country, Ukraine and elsewhere. Life is not all comfort and joy. But all the fear, the suffering and sadness that we might have experienced, Jesus has experienced it too and much more along his journey – the journey that brought him to the Jordan river.

So, Jesus was just standing in line with everyone else, no queue jumping, just waiting to be baptized. When it was his turn, John looked at him and basically said: No way! You should baptize me. Once again, just like the wise men, John had seen something unique about Jesus. He was definitely morally superior. He had no need of repentance and yet, he humbled himself to line up with sinners and be baptized with them.

Then, after Jesus stepped out of the water, the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove on him. Then he heard God's voice saying: This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. In that moment, on the riverbank, God the Father and the Holy Spirit became intricately and completely entwined with Jesus. As Colossians chapter 1 says: For in him, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And in that moment, Jesus both knew his purpose and was empowered to complete it. Talk about an "Aha" moment! Suddenly, his life made sense. This was the launching point for his public ministry. He was starting a new journey that was so important for him and for all of us.

But Jesus' time on earth was also important because he modelled for us how to live our lives, close to God. As I was thinking about this, I realized that the

beautiful image of Jesus entwining with God and Spirit is also a metaphor for what happens in our lives when we commit to him. When we entwine closely with Jesus, we too experience new life and purpose.

I'll admit I am not a fan of Christmas festivities; this is often a depressing time for me so I am quite happy to know that we will be done after today. But when I studied this Christmas story for the last time this season, I knew I had to be careful not to miss the point of it all! This past year has been hard for me and I realized that I was not as closely connected to God as I wanted to be. I had become somewhat unentwined, unraveled. Then I heard in this story, God's invitation to become re-entwined with Him again, so that like Jesus, I could be empowered to face the journey ahead. So, if you've been feeling a bit unraveled after all the activities and stresses of this season, let this story of Jesus be an epiphany for you too. God's invitation to come closer is always there, but sometimes, it needs a special occasion for us to hear it and respond.

Alright, you probably know this that at this point in the New Year, most people have either broken their New Year resolutions or completely forgotten what they were. So, I think this is a good day to make a new and lasting resolution! To seek once again to bind ourselves up more tightly with God, and not let anything unravel us. That won't be easy. Look at Jesus' experience. Immediately after this incredible event, he was driven into the wilderness where his understanding of his identity and mission was challenged by the devil.

How do we protect our relationship with God during times of turmoil or change?

The answer is the worst word in the English language: discipline. Both Bishop

Gordon and Fr. Shaw have spoken about the importance of reading scripture and developing an ongoing conversation with God through prayer. Perhaps, like me, you want a steady practice but need a variety of ways to talk and listen to God.

There are books that teach us about different ways to deepen our union with God – we have some at church that might interest you or perhaps you already know a good one to share with others over coffee.

There are always new things that God wants to teach us to help us grow and become stronger. So, here's my question: what are the next steps that God is inviting you to take at the start of this Epiphany season so you can become more stably entwined with Jesus? Take some time to think about this. To commit to this. Commit to whatever it takes to keep you on a journey of growth and joy!

We don't know what the journey ahead will be like for our parish. I have heard several people say "It's OK, we've been here before". but we haven't been **here** before. We are in new place. New people, changes all around us. Seeing me up here! A bit of a surprise, right, especially for me. These **are** different times! The wise men thought they knew their way home but then in a dream, they were told to find a new route. We are also on a new path. But if we stay entwined tightly with God and passionately follow the Holy Spirit's guiding star, and never, never forget that we, too, are God's beloved sons and daughters, then our journey as a parish, just like our personal journeys, will be one of growth and joy.