

OPENING SENTENCE:

There are varieties of gifts, services, and activities, but there is one Spirit, one Lord, and one God.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your word and sacraments, shine with the radiance of his glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; for he lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN

Sermon: Lamb of God

Scripture: John 1:29-42

29 The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' 32 And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.' 35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' 39 He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). 42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

This is the word of God.

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, No hands but yours,
No feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which to look out, Christ compassion to the world; Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now."

This poem is attributed to Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic, composed by her in a letter sent to her nuns toward the end of her life. Nevertheless, it has taken on a popular presence in Christian spirituality and reflects a common understanding of what some call an incarnational theology – the idea that we are to be Jesus Christ to the world. At its foundation, incarnational theology reminds us all that God became incarnate – became flesh – in Jesus Christ to embody fully God's love for the world. Teresa of Avila, calls on us to incarnate Christ in our own selves and to love the world as Jesus did, even to the point of "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies" as the apostle Paul write to the Church in Corinth. (2Cor. 4:10)

In this passage from John's Gospel, we hear something of a retelling of two key moments in Jesus' life: his baptism and the call of the first disciples. Last week, on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we heard of Matthew's account of the baptism. Next week, on the third Sunday after the Epiphany, we will hear Matthew's account of the call of Peter, Andrew, and the brothers James and John, sons of Zebedee. What is it that makes John important on this particular Sunday every year?

Context is everything, and the first thing to note is that this is the third Sunday of ten that find their orientation only in relation to the Epiphany of the Lord. This Sunday, like the two before it and the seven that follow it, is thus a Sunday on which the church celebrates the fact that God is manifest (epiphany) in the human being named Jesus of Nazareth (incarnation). “The word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (1:14)

The second thing to note is that the celebration of the Epiphany has an interesting and complex history within the life of the church.

As the West came to emphasize Christmas, eventually deciding on the date of December 25, the East emphasized Epiphany, which included a celebration not only of Jesus’ birth but also of his baptism and other significant events like the miracle at the wedding in Cana. Eventually the West adopted the celebration of Epiphany on January 6 and used it to mark the end of Christmas, placing a special emphasis on the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem. The East eventually adopted December 25 as the date for celebrating Jesus’ birth, which then placed the emphasis of Epiphany on Jesus’ baptism.

What might all this shifting and sharing between East and West teach us about the Theological importance of Epiphany? Take as a starting point the fact that in the West the Epiphany of the Lord marks the end of Christmas. In many churches, this end is performed symbolically but definitively by moving the magi and their gifts to the manger, after having held them back for the twelve days of Christmas. People often ask about this delay; why wait?

Of course, there is a practical response: the magi had to travel a long distance to Bethlehem, so it would be wrong to place them at the manger too soon after the birth. There is also the familiar theological response that the magi are Gentiles from “the East”. Thus, their arrival at the manger to pay homage to a baby born to be king of the Jews marks a moment when God is manifest to the world beyond Israel. God is God of the whole world, but we do not know that till the magi show up.

One might ask the question and ask why, if God was incarnate already in Mary’s womb, as John the Baptist, still in Elizabeth’s womb, had noticed, and was born into the Judean air, as the shepherds noticed, do we have to wait to celebrate the Epiphany? Is not Christmas enough? Many an impatient person, seemingly quite clear about the amazing moment of God become human in the baby Jesus, is quite happy to speed up the arrival of the magi to acknowledge that God is manifest in the manger.

An answer to our impatience rest in the Eastern church’s original celebration of the birth of Jesus, the baptism of Jesus, and the certain miracles with a single festival on January 6: the Epiphany of the Lord. Theologically, this Eastern emphasis on a continuum of events that add up to the Epiphany was an open acknowledgment of just how difficult a notion the incarnation is.

By holding together, on a single feast day, the birth, the baptism, and the miracles like those at the wedding in Cana, the Eastern church was in effect, building a liturgical case for the incarnation: not just a baby in a manger, but one who attracted the attention of the world, one for whom the heavens opened up so that he might be claimed with the words from last weeks reading,” This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Add in the wedding at Cana, where John says of the water that became wine, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory.” (John 2:11) This string of Sundays that we encounter in the lectionary as “After the Epiphany” serves to remind us that a baby in a manger is not enough to support our theological claims for the incarnation.

We need more than Christmas, even if we wait patiently for the arrival of the magi. We need to see Jesus walk into the Jordan. We need to see the clouds’ part. We need to hear the booming voice name Jesus a beloved Son. We need to hear Jesus himself ask us, as he asks Peter and Andrew in this passage from John, “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38). We will be tempted to rush our reply, just as we hurry the magi on their way to the manger. Before we answer, we need to remember that there are seven more Sundays “after the Epiphany,” and six of them are devoted to the Sermon on the Mount. We would do

well to wait to hear what Jesus has to say in the coming weeks before we answer His question and finish the celebration we started at Christmas.

BENEDICTION:

May the spark of God ignite you, May the love of Christ renew you, May the Holy Spirit fill you, on this Sunday and all the days to come.

MAY THE PEACE OF CHRIST BE WITH YOU.